

A Wallflower's Darling Lord

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

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A Wallflower's Darling Lord

Introduction

Miss Helena Ashby, daughter to a trade merchant, has found herself thrown in at the deep end of society. When her father is sent to the debtor's prison, leaving her penniless, Helena, shy, down to earth and completely unprepared, must battle the gossip that surrounds her name, and fit in a world where everyone looks askance at her. When she finds occupation as a lady's companion, destiny brings her to the man who will be haunting her dreams every night. But external forces will not let her find happiness next to him all too easy. Will Helena find her way to be with the man she hopelessly loves despite all odds, or her plans for the future will go up in smoke?

Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins has always feared that he will be driven off course if he cannot find a proper woman to hold him down. When his unsuspected affections are laid upon a woman whose life has been one scandal after another, he is determined to rescue her from ruin, if he ever wants to find real happiness in life.

But the road is full of obstacles, as the woman he has fallen in love with is the companion of the malicious lady he unwillingly courts. Will he manage to avoid a union that that will make his life an eternal torture? Will Edwin help the only woman he has ever loved to escape her tragic fate and share the rest of her life with him?

Helena and Edwin are most enchanted by each other from the moment they meet. But when Helena's jealous and malicious lady makes every effort to disgrace her and drive her away from Edwin, everything seems to go downhill. Could the two soulmates find a way to make their two worlds one in such a dire situation? Will their love survive the pitfalls threatening to destroy it?

Prologue

At just eleven years old, Miss Helena Ashby was enamoured with the great hunt. The privilege of being surrounded by so many fanciful people was an honour she and her father could rarely afford.

Though he'd earned his knighthood fair and square, there were still many within high society who turned their noses up at the mere mention of them.

Determined to make the most of it, Helena drank in every detail of the magnificently strong horses, the frills upon the ladies' surcoats, the rich colours worn by the men of the gentry. Each one of them was dressed from head to toe in fine silk and cotton garments, decorated with gold buttons and brooches. Even their leather boots spoke of their unbelievable wealth as they shone in the sunshine after a fresh polishing.

Though the hunt had not yet begun, the excitement was palpable as the ladies and gentlemen gathered among their steeds, ready to begin. Both young and old, dressed in their finest riding attire, mingled with one another, discussing which gentleman was expected to vanquish the first fox. Standing a little way off, Helena could just make out the name of the front runner.

Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins, although a boy of only sixteen, was rumoured to be among the finest of horsemen and everyone expected that he might be the first to make his mark upon the hunt.

Though Helena had not yet met him personally, she could just about pick him out from the crowd. He was the talk of all the young ladies

with his handsome good looks and wealthy standing.

Although an adolescent, the ground they stood upon belonged to him by right of inheritance and he seemed comfortable with the knowledge of that. He held himself with such grace that Helena could almost believe he was older than his years.

He was a proud young man of athletic build with a lavish mop of dark hair and facial hair that had already begun to grow thickly upon his chiselled jawline. A fact that was enviable amongst several other young men in the group.

Many of the young females within the group swanned around him as he and his male companion, Sir Joshua Makepeace, inspected their horses for a final time. The grand grey stallion beside him was just as dashing as his owner and some would say the finest hunting horse around.

"Daughter?" Sir Randal Ashby, Helena's father, had been preparing his horse behind her. The great black stallion, a mark of his knighthood due to his exceptional work as a shipping merchant, stood proudly beside him as he turned his attention upon her. The horse let out a huff of breath from its nostrils, as though displeased to have its owner's attention stolen.

Helena had been so intent upon the people around her that his husky voice caused her heart to skip a beat. And when she turned to look at him, she found his expression a deep smile that said he had been watching her for some time.

"I do not feel like riding today," he explained to her. "Perhaps you might ride instead?"

Though she knew her father was always in the mood for riding, she did not question him for she had always dreamt of being able to ride among the hunt. She'd often read about it in her books, so much so that when she closed her eyes, she could picture it.

"Oh, Father, do you really mean it?" Helena asked as excitement flared within her.

Several of the noblemen and women around them cast a glance in their direction as Helena threw her arms around her father's neck. A young girl, still learning her airs and graces, she did not remember that such shows of admiration were frowned upon.

Though now a wealthy man, her father had not been so generous as to supply her with her own horse. In fact, she had never owned her own, instead sitting upon her father's whenever he allowed. Of late that had not been very often for he was always busy with business or attending high society events.

"I believe that Midnight would be honoured for you to ride him today," her father insisted, and he ushered her forwards to help her up, and Helena noticed with amusement that her father had already furnished the horse with a side-saddle.

The power of the horse radiated beneath her even as the other riders began to mount their horses.

The knowledge that the hunt would soon begin was spreading like wildfire throughout the crowd.

"Now, remember," her father spoke gently to her even as he stroked the stallion's powerful neck, "don't do anything to spook him and he will take good care of you."

"Of course not, Father," Helena insisted, for she had learnt long ago not to spook a horse. She remembered the first time he'd allowed her to ride her mother's old mare. She'd dug her heels into the beast's flanks so hard that she'd been catapulted off. Whenever she thought back to it, she still felt a twinge of pain in her spine.

"Riders at the ready!" the hunt's foreman called to the crowd, and several of them nodded.

"You remember how to ride?" Sir Randal asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"Yes, Father, I remember." Helena nodded and gripped hold of the reins as her father helped her to slip one foot into the stirrup.

Sitting side-saddle had never been all that comfortable, but looking out at the other women upon their horses, Helena was quietly determined to do a good job. She would not be made fun of today. Her life depended upon it.

She hooked the back of her knee around the notch at the front of the saddle and removed a scrap of lint from her skirt, even as her father stepped back to admire her upon his horse.

"You look magnificent." he complimented with a loving smile, and Helena's cheeks began to blush. She was all too aware of the more experienced riders who shot concerned glances her way, as though they could sense the weakness in her position. She remembered how her mother had once called noblemen and women bloodhounds, for they could smell weakness a mile away.

All too soon the hunting horn blasted. The dogs began to howl as they hurried off towards the ravine at the edge of the estate. Spooked by all the noise, Midnight set off at break-neck speed, leaving Sir Randal to watch in dismay as his daughter was carried off into the sea of other horses and people.

"Whoa, Midnight! Be calm!" Helena pleaded with the horse, but all she could do was cling onto the saddle as her foot slipped from the stirrup. Terrible panic clotted in her stomach as she realised much too late that she was not ready to ride in the hunt.

Uneased by the horse's sudden speed, Helena's knuckles turned bone-white upon the saddle as she tried desperately to hold on.

"Oh, Midnight, please!" she gasped, her voice rising a little higher than a lady's ought. No doubt the rest of the hunt had noticed her misfortune by now, and she would be the laughing stock of the day.

The world whizzed past with every stamp of the horse's hooves, and Helena became more and more panicked. The closer to the ravine they became, the more she realised she was in serious trouble. One misstep and the horse might stumble and throw her off.

She could only imagine what might happen if she was thrown from

the saddle. Awful accidents had occurred from horseback, and Helena couldn't help but think of them as she found herself growing ever closer to her own. She thought of the son of one of her father's ship workers and how he'd broken his spine falling from his horse. He had never recovered, and the family were grief-stricken to this very day.

It had begun to dawn upon her that the only way to stop was to throw herself from the horse when she suddenly felt an arm wrap around her waist.

Her slender body came away from the saddle all too easily, and yet she did not find herself thrown in the dirt but instead sat upon the lap of her rescuer.

Even as Midnight sped off in ignorance of her disappearance, Helena found the horse beneath her slowing to a halt. The warm, muscular body behind her was sturdy in stature and stone-strong. She could never have guessed who it might be.

"Miss Helena, are you well?" An unfamiliar voice hit her ear and when she glanced over her shoulder, she found herself face-to-face with the man of the hour.

The blue-brown eyes that gazed back at her bounced with both amusement and concern in equal measure, although he did not berate her misfortune.

So frightened upon the sudden change within Midnight, Helena hadn't noticed him riding up beside her, and the speed with which he had plucked her from the saddle caused her head to spin.

“I am well,” Helena insisted, “thanks to you, Lord Edwin.”

He did not seem shocked at her knowledge of him, comfortable in the fact that almost everybody knew his name.

Even as others harried around them, Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins swung down from the saddle and reached up to help Helena down. His strong hands remained beneath her arms for only a moment before he released her, though her skin continued to tingle with his touch long after.

Still shaking from the trauma of her near accident, Helena struggled to remain on her feet before him, bowing her head in quiet respect. She wracked her brain for something to say, but nothing would come to her and so she simply remained there, blushing.

“Those darned horns can be quite frightening for horses new to the hunt,” Lord Edwin smiled down at her, “Do not be disheartened.”

“Perhaps it was my own fault, my lord,” Helena insisted. Though she did not look up she could feel his powerful gaze upon her. “It was not my place to ride among the hunt.”

She had always known that she would never be any good, but she had dreamt of it so often.

“Oh, Helena! My dear daughter. Are you hurt?” Sir Randal hurried forth through the crowd of horses who had begun to turn their attention back to the hunt. The little girl who has almost broken her

neck trying to be like them was of little consequence.

“No, Father. I am quite well.” Helena finally looked up as her father examined her closely. “Thanks to Lord Edwin.”

She gestured to her rescuer and again felt her cheeks brim with heat.

“Kind sir, you have my thanks.” Sir Randal hurried to grip Lord Edwin’s hand firmly in gratitude. “I am at a loss for how to show my gratitude.”

Lord Edwin simply gripped her father’s hand and smiled.

“Please, calm yourself, good sir,” Lord Edwin insisted. “It is reward enough that Miss Helena is well.”

His words caused Helena to swoon much like all the other young ladies had been doing all morning. She found herself admiring the sharp planes of Lord Edwin’s face as he assured her father that all was well.

For the first time, Helena was able to see why many of the other young ladies fawned over Lord Edwin. He was not only handsome and well-dressed, but he was also kind. He had been the only one within the hunting party to come to her rescue while others simply looked on and spoke in hushed tones. She knew her misfortune would be talked about for days to come, but when faced with a young man like Lord Edwin, she found she didn’t much care.

"Miss Helena, perhaps if your father would allow, you might join us when we retire for lunch?" Lord Edwin asked and Helena was more shocked than ever. It had already been an honour to be allowed to witness the hunt. But to be asked to accompany Lord Edwin during lunch was something Helena had never even dreamed of.

Their rocky position with high society had always left Helena on the outskirts of every event.

"I do believe that accompanying you for lunch is the least my daughter might do to thank you for rescuing her, Lord Edwin," Sir Randal responded for her, as she was much too shocked. Her cheeks blushed wildly as she simply nodded, hoping that he would not notice.

A fondness for the young gentleman she'd never really thought about before began to develop within her, and she couldn't help but smile at the thought of spending more time with him.

"Until then." Lord Edwin gave a low bow and smiled politely before returning to his horse.

It wasn't until he removed himself that Helena noticed that several other participants of the hunt had hung back to watch their exchange.

The breeze carried with it the voice of one of the onlookers. "A man who buys his knighthood has no business here."

It was a spiteful comment, the likes of which she should have been used to by now.

Helena's stomach clenched at the words and she quickly averted her gaze from the direction from which it had come, for she did not want them to know that she had overheard.

Her father had worked his way up through trade and many of the nobles did not believe that he belonged. It was a fact that Helena had to put up with and try to ignore if she was ever to fit in with these people, although she feared they might never allow her to. The backs of many of the nobles were always turned to her whenever they got the chance, and she did not miss the snide way they conversed with her father either.

"Are you going to be all right?" Sir Randal asked his daughter as though he had not heard the words. Perhaps, too, he had chosen to simply ignore them.

"Yes father," Helena assured him. She did not want him to see how much the disdain of the other nobles still affected her.

"Good, as I have some business I must attend to." Sir Randal smiled and kissed her upon the forehead as he always did. Another thing that several of the nobles were likely to mutter about.

Helena watched as her father wandered over to a group of three gentlemen. The exchange between her father and the closest gentleman began the wagging of chins all over again as he produced several notes from his pocket.

Helena felt her heart sink when she heard the mention of gambling

from somewhere among the crowd.

She couldn't help but notice the way that several ladies and gentlemen shook their heads with disapproval. She couldn't understand what her father was thinking, making so blatant a show of his darker habits. No doubt the gentleman he handed the money to was just as displeased to have his dirty laundry aired in such a public setting. The disgust was clear on his face as he forced the money back into Sir Randal's pocket and whispered something into his ear.

Fitting in with the nobility would be much harder if her father forgot the airs and graces with which they were accustomed. A show of gambling was not polite in many settings, especially this one.

"The man should be ashamed of himself," she overheard one of the ladies hiss. "Exchanging money in public like that. He may as well wear a gambler's sign around his neck."

Helena felt the eyes of the nobility switch from her father to her and back again before they continued to speak in more hushed tones.

She couldn't help but wonder why gambling was such a problem when gossip seemed to fly about so easily. Perhaps her young mind was too innocent to understand.

Embarrassment reddened her face further and it was then that Helena decided it was better to find a place to hide until the hunt was finished. At least then she might be able to have a better time of things at the luncheon.

The shade of the stable wall was where she found comfort. The warm smell of horsehair and straw eased her shattered nerves as she sat upon a pile of boxes left behind by the stablehands.

A nail sticking from the wood snagged her clothes and she quickly adjusted her position to get more comfortable.

She rested against the wall with her eyes closed and prayed that the day would soon be over so that she might return to the relative safety of their home in the small village of Shere.

It wasn't until she heard the sound of somebody clearing their throat that she realised she must have dozed off. The sound almost caused her to jump out of her skin.

Her eyes fluttered open to find that the sun had moved clear across the sky. She must have been there for hours before being disturbed. No doubt her face had been reddened by the sun and she could only imagine how dishevelled she must look.

"Lord Edwin!" she gasped as she hurried to stand and brush off the dust from her riding clothes. While she hadn't expected to be riding, she still wanted to look the part.

"I'm sorry, Miss Helena, I did not mean to surprise you." Lord Edwin smirked as though he was pleased by the embarrassed flush of her cheeks.

"I...I wasn't aware that the hunt had returned," she admitted. She could hear now the sounds of voices and movement coming from around the corner of the stables as men and women returned their horses to the stablehands.

"I can see that." Lord Edwin's face remained a picture of amusement. "Why are you hiding back here?"

"I fear it is because I am embarrassed," Helena admitted and stroked a stray strand of mousy brown hair from her face. She could only hope she looked less disoriented than she felt. The last thing she wanted was for him to believe she was simply a messy little girl.

"Miss Helena, what happened with your horse might have happened to anyone," Lord Edwin assured her. She was instantly relieved that he believed it was her incident with the horse that concerned her. She did not wish to bring up her father's fragile position within society again. No doubt he would not understand even if she had. He had been born into wealth and was not so likely to understand her rocky position.

She was even more relieved at his kindness. There were many others within the group who might have simply chosen to berate and humiliate her for what had happened.

"You are right," she admitted quickly with a sweetened smile. It was better for him to believe it was only the incident that weighed on her mind.

"Perhaps we can forget all about it and you can join us for the picnic I

mentioned earlier today?" Lord Edwin suggested with a wry smile. He was even more handsome when he smiled. The upturned corners of his lips caused the sharpness of his cheeks to show further and created shadows in all the right places.

Helena's heart skipped a beat as she realised he had remembered his invitation. At first, she had believed it to be just simple courtesy that had led him to extend a hand to her. Most were all too willing to make an invitation when they didn't believe she would accept. That was possibly another reason why they treated her so badly. They believed that if they berated her enough, they might get away without her company when they were forced to give her an invitation out of mere courtesy.

Now she believed he truly wished for her company and it made all the difference in the world. For the first time in a long time, she no longer felt as though she was at the bottom of the food chain. She could almost imagine that she belonged.

"I would be glad to, Lord Edwin," she responded with a small curtsy, which awarded her another brilliant smile. Her heart fluttered at his handsomeness and she blushed all the more.

When he offered her the crook of his elbow, Helena decided it would be impolite to decline and simply slipped her hand into his waiting arm. The muscle she found there was strong and sturdy, much like his torso had been when he had rescued her from the back of her father's horse.

She allowed him to lead her around the side of the stables, through the yard and out into the meadow, where several other parties had begun to congregate. Just as they had when they had been waiting for the hunt to begin, they kept to small groups, gossiping and laughing as though they had not a care in the world.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Miss Helena Ashby," Lord Edwin announced as they stopped beside the closest group. Several of the young nobility turned their heads to acknowledge her while one of the young women, who sat upon a checked red blanket, waved her over with a smile.

"Miss Helena! Do come and sit over here!" she insisted politely.

The girl who spoke could have been no more than two years older than Helena and yet she seemed much more womanly, both in dress and manner. The expensive material of her embroidered hunting jacket was glossy, and the buttons shone in the late afternoon sunshine. Her dark hair was piled on top of her head and fastened with a ruby red ribbon.

"Miss Helena, this is my cousin Lady Claire Littleton," Lord Edwin explained as he helped her down onto the picnic blanket beside the beautiful brunette. She was the very image of grace and beauty that Helena imagined of all high society's women.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, my lady." Helena smiled shyly and gave a respectful bow of her head.

"Oh, please, do just call me Lady Claire," the girl smirked back at her. Helena still had a difficult time remembering her courtesies when it came to titles, for most of the people she'd come into contact with before her father's knighthood had been commoners who were pleased to be called by their first name, or Mr, Mrs and Miss.

"And this is Sir Joshua Makepeace," Lord Edwin added, gesturing at the young gentleman beside Lady Claire.

He was as fine a looking man as Lord Edwin himself, although his hair was a shade darker and his eyes more stern. There was a danger about him, though not unkind, that told Helena she should remain wary of him.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss Helena." Sir Joshua gave a gracious bow of his head and offered her his hand. From the moment he first opened his mouth, Helena was just old enough to know that he was what her father called a charmer.

Not wishing to be impolite, Helena reached out to take hold of his hand, shocked when he placed his lips upon the back of her knuckles. Yet another signal that her first impression had been the right one.

"Now Sir Joshua, do not charm the poor girl!" Lady Claire scolded. "You've caused her to blush."

"And I do believe she is all the prettier for it," Sir Joshua smirked as he released Helena's hand to allow it to fall back to her side.

Sir Joshua was a young man definitely worthy of keeping an eye on.

"Do not mind him," Lady Claire insisted. "Sir Joshua and Lord Edwin are as bad as each other when it comes to pretty ladies."

"I resent that accusation, Lady Claire," Sir Joshua feigned innocence.
"Lord Edwin is far worse than I."

As he spoke, the sound of chattering and footsteps sounded behind them.

"Ahh, here come the other ladies," Lord Edwin mused.

Helena turned just in time to see two young ladies walking towards them. Both were dressed in a similar fashion to Lady Claire, with shining buttons and hair pinned up with bejewelled clips.

"Lady Susan! Lady Winifred! Do come and meet Miss Helena," Lady Claire insisted as they drew nearer.

Both young ladies looked disinterested, but nevertheless, they came to sit upon the blanket.

"Miss Helena this is Lady Susan Tompkins." Lady Claire introduced the first woman, who was a pretty, fair-haired girl with an ivory complexion. When she smiled her teeth were the whitest that Helena had ever seen, standing out against her rosebud lips.

"Pleased to meet you," Miss Helena greeted her kindly.

"Likewise." Lady Susan's nose wrinkled slightly as she spoke. Clearly, she was not as pleased as the others to have Helena in their company.

"And Lady Winifred Yarmouth. I do believe that you are distantly related to Miss Helena on your mother's side?" Lady Claire acknowledged the second girl, whose mousy brown hair was pinned so tightly that not a stray strand could be seen.

"I do believe you are right," Lady Winifred agreed, although she did not seem pleased by the acknowledgement.

Helena had already known this, taking great care to learn her relationship among those in high society after her father had told her that it might one day aid her in finding a good husband.

Lady Winifred said, "So Miss Helena, do tell us, for we would love to know. What are your hobbies? I, myself, am much interested in jewellery making." She lifted her wrist to show a finely made silver bracelet.

"Not that you could tell with that hideous necklace she wears around her neck," Lady Susan jibed, but the look that passed between them told Helena there was no animosity.

The necklace itself was an ornate locket that looked as though it may have been passed down through generations of the lady's family.

"I could not say that I am as interesting as that, but I do find much comfort in reading," Helena admitted, and the look that passed between her company told her that had been the last thing they'd expected.

"You like to read?" Lady Claire asked, surprised.

"Yes. My father often complains that I spend far too much time with my nose in a book," Helena smiled.

She could feel Lord Edwin watching her with curiosity, yet it was Lady Claire who continued to speak. "Well good for you!" she insisted. "You should be proud to have learnt how to read. I, myself, find reading too often to be very dull and would much rather have a servant do it for me."

Helena felt the high praise of her comment and did not believe that the lady had meant any disrespect.

In fact, Lady Claire seemed quite interested in her hobbies of reading and they talked on it for much of the afternoon, while Lady Susan and Lady Winifred discussed the latest fashions from France.

Lord Edwin and Sir Joshua seemed to have the hunt on their minds and entered into their own conversation, though Helena couldn't help but glance over several times to find him watching her with interest. Each time she found herself blushing a deeper shade of red.

It wasn't until the picnic had been picked apart and the conversation had begun to dwindle that the group began to make their way back towards the manor.

Sir Joshua quickly took the arms of Lady Susan and Lady Winifred, in order to keep his hands free of the picnic basket, which Lord Edwin

picked up before offering his elbow to Miss Helena.

"Would you do me the honour of allowing me to escort you back to the manor before you depart?" Lord Edwin asked, even as Lady Claire began to wander after the others with no great speed.

"The pleasure would be all mine," Helena replied in an attempt to sound grown-up. She cared what he thought of her and the last thing she wanted was for him to think she was a little girl.

Lord Edwin smiled as she took hold of his arm and the two walked casually behind the others. Helena was pleased with their slow speed, which suggested Lord Edwin was in no hurry to see her depart. In fact, it was rather pleasant to simply be within his company and gaze around at the beauty of the estate. Wildflowers were growing on either side of the lane and whenever she glanced upwards, she found birds gliding overhead.

Though they were silent it was not an awkward silence as Helena had expected it to be.

She allowed it to stretch out until they passed by the stables and continued up the lane to the manor house. "Lord Edwin, please allow me to thank you again for rescuing me today. I do not know what accident might have befallen me had you not acted so quickly."

She took a moment to remember how it had felt to be swept up into his arms and onto his lap. Though it had been a bumpy ride, it had not been entirely unpleasant with the warm spicy scent of him washing over her.

"Do not thank me," Lord Edwin shook his head, and his glossy dark brown curls glinted in the early evening sunshine. "I could not call myself a gentleman if I refused to help those in need."

Helena was utterly taken by him then. His kindness seemed to know no bounds and when he smiled his entire face lit up. He was certainly a charmer, much like his friend Sir Joshua.

"But still, I must thank you all the same," Helena insisted, looking at him from beneath her dark lashes. "You may well have saved my life."

Lord Edwin paused at the very edge of the manor house yard and dropped the picnic basket beside him.

Helena was surprised at the way he gripped hold of her hands and knelt down so that they came to eye level. For one girlish moment, Helena imagined that she was a young woman about to receive the question that all young ladies dreamt of, although she knew she was far too young and he too noble for such things.

"Miss Helena, you were very brave today," he insisted with a smile that said he was proud of her. "I can think of far worse things that might have happened had you panicked. Your poise and graciousness were a sight to behold. You conducted yourself very well."

The praise he bestowed upon her was great indeed, after so long grown accustomed to the way that most looked down on her.

The beating of her heart skipped then as he gave her hands a gentle

squeeze, and she found herself longing that he might never let go.

"We really ought to be going inside," Helena said, although she wished that she might be able to spend a little more time with him.

"You are right. We wouldn't want the ladies to begin gossiping." The corner of Lord Edwin's mouth twitched upwards with amusement and Helena couldn't stop the girlish giggle that passed between her smiling lips.

Lord Edwin pushed himself to his feet and dusted off his breeches before picking up the basket and allowing her to take his elbow once again.

"I must admit that when my father said we were to join the hunt I never imagined it would be in a place like this," Helena said as they wandered into the yard. "Do you live here?"

She marvelled at the grand manor house with its fine architecture and climbing ivy. The lead-patterned windows seemed as large as doorways overlooking the yard and the fields beyond.

"Yes, I am quite privileged to live in such a place. I will miss it."

"Miss it?" Helena grew concerned then, "Why would you miss it, my lord?"

"I must travel to Eton college soon, and soon after take the Grand Tour

around Europe." Lord Edwin explained and his face grew dark with grief. It was clear that he had a great love for the place he called home. Though Helena could not quite understand how such a large place could be considered a home, she could see why he would miss it. The entire estate was beautiful, like something out of one of her books.

Helena's heart sunk deep into her stomach, for she had hoped to be able to spend more time getting to know him and his kindness. It was a great loss to know that it might be a long time before she would see him again.

"Will you be gone long?" she asked, hoping he would not sense her distress.

"A good few years I should think," Lord Edwin admitted, and Helena's heart sank again. This time it gave her quite the stomach-ache. She had spent so long trying to fit in. Lord Edwin might have been the bridge to close the gap, and here he was about to depart.

"Won't you be homesick?" Helena asked.

"I fear I shall," Lord Edwin nodded. "Though it shall feel all the better when I return after completing my education."

"I imagine it will be a grand adventure." Helena could not keep the longing from her voice. Her love for reading had left her with a taste for education that would never be satisfied because of her gender.

"Perhaps I shall bring you back a book from my travels so that you

might one day read it for me," Lord Edwin suggested and Helena delighted in the thought.

Not only would she love to see which book he brought her, but the thought that he wanted to see her again in the future made her heart swell.

"I would very much like that," she responded joyfully, and resigned herself to the fact that she would have to wait an age to see it fulfilled.

She would hold that afternoon as one of her best for a very long time to come.

Chapter 1

At twenty years of age, Helena's dreams of finally fitting in with high society were scattered to the wind.

Sat among the ruins of what remained of their quaint home in Surrey, she remembered how beautiful it had once been. Freshly painted in pastels with fine furnishings to match, it had been a place she had been proud to call home. Her father's knighthood had brought with it a wealth of money, tapestries and paintings as well as fine jewellery and clothing. Though she'd had all those things, Helena had never grown used to them or the people who had been born to such things.

No matter how hard she tried, she never felt as though she belonged. Many of the people surrounding them had never quite let her forget the much poorer life she had come from.

Just as quickly as their wealth had come along, however, it was cast away from them, eaten up by her father's need for drinking and gambling.

Sitting in the dining room, her plate lit by a single candle at the centre of the table, Helena barely picked at the measly meal before her.

The room was cold without a fire set in the hearth and she had to wrap her shawl tighter around her shoulders to stave off the chill.

Though the house was still filled with fine things, they had become dusty and unkempt in the wake of losing their housekeeper. The wallpaper and paint that had once been bright and brand-new now flaked and peeled, the walls cracking beneath. The last of the firewood had long since burned to embers in the fireplace, and she feared it would be a long and cold final night in their home.

Her father sat at the opposite end of the table, a shameful scowl upon his face. Whenever he looked up at her there were tears in his eyes, though she had never once seen him let them fall. He had always been much too proud a man for that.

Helena couldn't help but look upon him with pity as she thought of how hard he had worked to gain his knighthood and the fortune that came with it. Perhaps if her mother had not perished with fever he might never have turned to the bottle and card games that so frequently occupied his evenings.

Or maybe there would be a third person sat in sombre silence at the dining table that night. She could never know for sure. But what she did know was that in the morning the bailiffs would arrive to pick apart their belongings and drag her father off to Marshalsea. One thing she was glad of was that her mother was not alive to see what had become of them.

She had often heard of men, both poor and rich alike, finding themselves dragged off to the debtors' prison, and yet she had never imagined that her father might be one of them. Though she had grown up poor, the harsh reality of prison had always seemed a world away.

"Eat your supper, dear, before it goes cold," her father insisted, although he had barely touched his own.

Helena feared that his words were pointless for her food had been stone-cold long ago. In fact, she was sure it had never been piping hot in the first place, for she had not managed to stoke the cooking fire in the kitchen well enough.

Instead of pointing it out, she forced herself to eat a few more bites before placing her fork upon the table, "Father, I fear I am feeling unwell. May I be excused?"

For one brief moment that seemed to last an eternity, her father appeared to be about to refuse her request.

Then with a heavy sigh and a deep scowl he nodded. "Do feel better in the morning."

Even as she stood to remove herself from the dining room Helena knew that by the morning she would feel worse than ever, for it was then that she would have to say goodbye to the place she had called home for all her life.

The next morning, when the bailiffs battered the door with angry fists, Helena was already up and dressed. She had picked her favourite purple dress, fearful that if she didn't wear it they might have it taken from her. Purple had always been the colour her mother insisted looked best on her.

Though it was now a size too small for her and tattered at the seams,

she could at least make herself presentable. Much like the dress, her worn leather boots were far too tight on her feet, even if she didn't tie them up all the way.

When she arrived downstairs, she found her father beside the front door in the hallway. His hands trembled and his face was stricken as he reached tentatively for the door handle.

"Sir Randal Ashby! Let us in or we'll be forced to break the door down!" a harsh and unrecognisable voice sounded on the other side of the door.

Helena could imagine the strict and bulking forms of the bailiffs stood on the doorstep.

No doubt there were already onlookers gossiping on the street beyond.

"Father?" Helena said sympathetically. "We must let them in."

She wanted so badly to run back upstairs and throw herself under the covers of her bed, although she knew it would do no good. Ignoring them would only make things worse for her father.

"Oh, I know, I know," her father shook his head and Helena couldn't help but notice how much older he looked. In the last few years, he had gone from a fine young gentleman in his prime to a hunchbacked, pale-faced man who might have been mistaken for someone twice his years. The greyness to his hair was growing worse by the day and had spread down into the facial hair that had begun to grow more thickly on his chin.

"Stand with me, dear?" he asked, and Helena moved to stand beside him.

She gripped hold of his hand even as he reached with his other to grip the door handle.

"Sir Randal, please, for the love I bore my cousin, do open up!" That was Lord George Yarmouth's sympathetic voice. He had not only been Helena's mother's cousin but was also Lady Winifred's father. Helena thought for a moment of the mouse-like brown-haired lady who had once shared a picnic with her almost nine years earlier. That fateful day had been the beginning of the end when her father had practically announced his love for gambling by handing a payment to one of the other noblemen. If she closed her eyes, Helena could still see it now, the way the other nobles had gossiped about the incident.

In the years since, Helena had seen her cousins a handful of times and, although Lord Yarmouth had been kind to her, Lady Winifred had been less than gracious, sticking her nose out of joint whenever Helena was around.

"I'm coming!" Sir Randal called through the door, and he twisted the key and pulled the door open. Helena was almost sure she heard him curse under his breath as he did.

Stood on the front step was Lord Yarmouth himself in all his finery. His jacket was embroidered with the finest gold silk thread while his shoes shone as though they had been recently polished. No doubt he had stopped off to have them cleaned by one of the commoners in the marketplace before coming to displace them.

Behind him were two men dressed in striking black uniforms, their grave faces displeased at being made to wait. They were obviously in a hurry to get their job done, for the moment the door was open they waded in behind Lord Yarmouth. Their heavy footsteps were like thunder on the tiled floor and Helena couldn't help but flinch at the sound.

Helena had expected them to close the door behind them and yet it was not so. Instead, stepping into the dingy hallway, Lady Winifred herself gave a great smirk. "Sir Randal, Miss Helena, it is wonderful to see you both again, though I wish the circumstances were less dire."

She was finely dressed as ever, with a yellow ribbon in her hair to match the sunshine fabric of her dress. Helena couldn't help but think that yellow was an odd colour to wear on such an awful day. Perhaps Lady Winifred had worn the colour by mere coincidence, but Helena was almost sure it was far more than that.

There was nothing about the expression on Lady Winifred's face that said she was sad at their situation. In fact, she seemed quite merry.

Of course, who wouldn't be with a set of fine white pearls around her neck and a bejewelled ribbon in her hair? The white fur muff that protected her fingers from the cold was fluffed out and caught the light of the late autumn sun that shone through the open doorway.

Everything about her said she was comfortable in her position and had not wanted for anything her entire life. Helena envied her that.

"Forgive us for the intrusion, Sir Randal, but my daughter and I had

hoped we might make today a little easier on the both of you by being here," Lord Yarmouth explained to his cousin's widower. His tone was not at all unkind and Helena could believe he meant it, although she could not say the same for his daughter.

"I thank you for being here." Sir Randal spoke through gritted teeth. It was clear to Helena that he was simply being polite, though he wished there was nobody around to see the embarrassment that would soon ensue.

A part of Helena wished that they might have been able to handle things during the night, but she knew that would only have caused more gossip.

"Sir Randal Ashby, we are hereby ordered to confiscate the contents of your home to pay towards your debt, and escort you to Marshalsea, where you shall remain until all remaining debts are paid," one of the men in uniform said, and Helena felt a lump form in her already tight throat. There had been so many stories of men going to debtors' prison and never returning, for their debts seemed to pile higher and higher with each passing day.

She had hoped it would never come to this and on several occasions in the privacy of their home begged her father to see reason. But her words had fallen upon deaf ears.

"Lady Winifred, take our cousin upstairs to her room while the gentlemen do their business," Lord Yarmouth suggested with a quick gesture of his hand.

"Of course, Father." Lady Winifred was all too happy to march Helena up the stairs and into the front bedroom that had been her only refuge

for so long.

"You know, Miss Helena, I do hate to see what has become of you," Lady Winifred said when the door was closed firmly behind them. "I had hoped we might be friends."

There was barely veiled venom in her words and Helena knew that Lady Winifred had never had such thoughts.

The young woman had only ever seen Helena as the daughter of a man who had reached too far above his station. In fact, it always appeared to Helena that Lady Winifred was often one of the first to begin gossiping.

"I am sure we might have been," Helena said plainly. The last thing she wanted was to cause a scene. Her father was going through enough without her adding to the matter.

"But of course, that can never be now, for you shall be tending to Lady Susan Tompkins," Lady Winifred pointed out even as she began to rummage through Helena's things, as though she had any right to do so.

Helena was dumbfounded at Lady Winifred's callousness. Even during their short encounters previously Lady Winifred had at least shown her the respect due to a lady of her standing. Yet now it seemed a distant memory.

Helena opened her mouth to speak only to bite down on her tongue when she saw the dainty emerald bracelet her visitor had picked out

of the jewellery box on the nightstand. She was instantly sickened to see Lady Winifred's hands all over it.

"This is quite beautiful," Lady Winifred smirked. "I shall ask father if I might keep it. At least then it might remain in the home it is accustomed to."

The jibe had Helena's blood boiling and, for the first time in her life, she could no longer hold her tongue.

Had it been anyone else she may have put up with it, but Lady Winifred was family.

"Lady Winifred, family should not be so vile towards each other," Helena pointed out, trying her best to keep her voice level. "And I should also point out that although your father has brought this house, he has not laid claim to any of its contents."

She quickly reached for the bracelet and half snatched it from her cousin's fingers before she could attempt to stop her.

Seemingly disinterested in the fine piece of jewellery and Helena's tone, she turned her attention to the rest of the contents within the jewellery box.

"I might remind you, dear cousin, that you can no more lay claim to the contents of this house than I can," she threw over her shoulder. But Helena was already making her way to the door. Lady Winifred was insufferable at the best of times, but now Helena feared what she might do if she remained in that room with her.

She slipped from the bedroom with the bracelet clutched tightly in her fingers and closed it so that Lady Winifred might not witness the tears that began to streak down her cheeks.

She allowed them to fall for only a moment before taking in a deep breath and wiping them away with the back of her knuckles. It would not do to allow anyone to see her cry, for that would only incite more gossip.

Another deep breath later and she was on her way back down the stairs. Holding her head high, she carried herself with as much grace as she could muster.

"Miss Helena? Is everything quite all right?" Lord George asked as she descended the stairs. He seemed quite content with watching as the bailiffs defiled her home and carried their things away. For the first time ever, Helena found that she did not like her cousin so much.

"Forgive me, Lord Yarmouth, but I feel I must ask you something," Helena said as soon as her feet landed on the tiled floor.

"Anything, Miss Helena," Lord Yarmouth assured her.

"I wondered if it might be at all possible for me to keep this," she asked, holding out the bracelet for him to inspect. Though it was only a fair piece of jewellery, it felt heavy in her hand with sentimental weight.

"What, my dear, would you want with such a fine piece of jewellery?" Lord Yarmouth asked as though he believed she no longer required such fine things. Perhaps he was right. What need did she have of it when she had nowhere to wear it?

"It was my mother's," Helena admitted in the hope it might win some sympathy. Her cousin had always been a fair man and she hoped she might appeal to that nature now.

Lord Yarmouth gave pause for only a moment as he thought over her request. His face was not entirely unsympathetic but the longer he paused the longer Helena feared she might lose.

"I am afraid that everything must go, but I may be able to sell it for you," he explained with a sympathetic tone. "You might then at least have some money to get on with when you join Lord Tompkins' household."

That was some small consolation, though Helena knew that, unlike his daughter, he was not trying to be unkind. Helena knew the kind of gossip that would spread if she was seen to keep something so valuable while her father languished in debtors' prison.

"Do you hear that, Helena?" her father said. "What a kind offer Lord Yarmouth has given you."

It was clear that her father was simply trying his best to hold himself together, for she knew that he would never have allowed her mother's things to be sold without a fight. Yet how could he fight this when the fault was entirely upon his shoulders?

"I would be very appreciative if you could," Helena forced herself to say the words as she felt the cold eyes of the bailiffs that watched her. She couldn't bear the thought of all her mother's possessions being eaten up by her father's debt. At least this way her mother's bracelet could count for something.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, but she would not give the bailiffs the satisfaction of allowing them to fall.

"I shall have it appraised with the jeweller and get its value returned to you," Lord Yarmouth replied, not unkindly, and Helena forced herself to hand over the bracelet, catching one final glimpse of the pretty green gemstones set into a finely crafted silver chain. She committed the piece of jewellery to memory so that she might always remember it and her mother who had worn it so fondly.

"May I see that?" A third man who Helena had not seen before suddenly appeared through the front entrance carrying a little black book and charcoal pencil. His hair was slicked back from his face and his eyes were larger than normal due to his spectacles, reminding Helena of a fly.

"Magistrate Winston," Lord Yarmouth greeted him and Helena realised that this must have been the man in charge of overseeing their removal from the house. Her heart sunk at the thought that he now had his eye upon her mother's bracelet.

"Please, hand over the bracelet, Lord Yarmouth," the magistrate insisted with a raised eyebrow, almost as though he was accusing the man of theft.

Lord Yarmouth handed over the bracelet and bile rose in Helena's throat.

"This bracelet will not fetch a great value at the jewellers," the magistrate insisted. "It should instead go towards Sir Randal's debt."

"If it is not of great value it will not take much away from Sir Randal's debt," Lord Yarmouth insisted coolly. "Even a small amount of money will go a long way for Miss Helena in her current circumstances."

The glint in the magistrate's eye told Helena that he had no intention of using the bracelet towards her father's debt. There seemed an ulterior motive on his part. Perhaps he hoped to give it to his wife. She had often heard tales of magistrates taking small tokens for themselves in order to make themselves feel better for the terrible things they did to the poor.

Lord Yarmouth stepped forwards and whispered something inaudible to the magistrate.

The man's eyebrow raised above his metal-rimmed spectacles and he finally handed the bracelet back. Relief washed over Helena to see the bracelet returned to her cousin's possession.

"Do what you please," the magistrate half snapped. "I do not have time for silly games. Good day, Lord Yarmouth."

The man disappeared further into the house to oversee the bailiffs' efforts further.

"Thank you, Lord Yarmouth," Sir Randal said from where he had been silently standing during the entire exchange. "You are a better man than I."

Helena's sympathy grew sevenfold as she watched her father hang his head in shame. He was a man defeated and Helena had no idea if she would ever see the father he had once been again.

"I will not allow a man to pocket jewels when he does not need them," Lord Yarmouth insisted sternly. "Not when there is a young lady more deserving of them."

Helena couldn't help but think how ridiculous her father had behaved. He must have known the situation he was getting them into when he gambled their fortune away. Surely he must have thought on it every time he had lost a game of cards.

Still, she held her tongue, for it would do no good to begin an argument, especially in front of Lord Yarmouth, who had been so kind to them.

By mid-afternoon, their home had been stripped bare ready for Lord Yarmouth and his family to take over. No doubt the nobleman would soon have a whole host of men in to make the place shine again.

There was nothing left to do except climb into the cart that was to take her father to Marshalsea and then carry her on to the Tompkins household.

It was a sparse cart, housing only two small trunks of clothes and a few books they had managed to keep from the bailiffs' clutches. It was a saddening thought that all they had in the world could be compiled into two trunks. Yet Helena was thankful to still have something. She couldn't bear the thought of having to plead with the Tompkins to provide her with necessities.

"Let me help you up, Miss Helena," Lord Yarmouth offered as he held out his hand to her beside the wagon.

"Thank you, Lord Yarmouth," Helena smiled back at him as she took his offered hand and allowed him to help her into the cart beside her father. He was already sat hunched for the journey ahead, a grim look upon his face.

There were several people on the street, all come to watch the ruin they had fallen into. Helena struggled not to make eye contact with them, for there were tears in her eyes again.

"I do hope you will be happy with Lord Tompkins and his family," Lord Yarmouth sighed, as though he knew it would not be so. There was no secret in the fact that the Tompkins had always looked down on Helena and her father. And yet their offer to take her in had been a gracious one, at least on the surface. No doubt they had some ulterior motive in the form of looking generous among the nobles.

"I will do my best to be happy," Helena assured him, and he smiled back at her as though her response pleased him. Part of her wished

that she might have been able to stay among her own household, but the thought of having to put up with Lady Winifred was even worse than that of Lady Susan.

"Take care of yourself," he told her, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze before stepping back to allow the bailiff to wheel the cart away from the house.

Helena looked over her shoulder to admire her home for one last time only to see Lady Winifred stood on the doorstep waving her away. There was a wry smile upon the woman's face, which caused Helena to want to curse under her breath. Knowing it was not ladylike, she kept her mouth shut until they were well on their way. She would not give Lady Winifred the satisfaction of seeing how upset she was.

"Father, must I live with the Tompkins?" Helena asked as they pulled away from Shere, the small village that had been her home. She thought of all the people she was leaving behind, such as the kindly baker, who had given her bread even when she couldn't afford to pay for it, and the flower girl, who had always offered her a kind smile whenever she passed selling her wares.

"There is nowhere else for you," her father pointed out. It was a grim fact indeed to know that she had nowhere else to go.

"May I not remain with you?" Helena asked, and her father's face dropped.

"Marshalsea is no place for a lady," he protested.

Yet how could she possibly be a lady now? Though her father had managed to keep his knighthood, they were penniless and destitute. Playing the role of a lady had been hard enough when they did have their fortune to back them up. Now it would be almost impossible, for she was to be a lady's companion, the closest thing to a servant that there was without being classed as such.

The thought that her father believed she might still be treated as a lady told her that he had lost all reason. Arguing with him would do her no good.

"I sometimes wonder how things might have turned out had your mother not left us," her father sighed, and Helena's heart clenched. He spoke as though her mother had abandoned them even though the poor woman had no choice in the matter. She remembered sitting beside her mother's bed as the fever took her, causing her to grow weaker and weaker by the day until she could barely breathe. It was a memory that often caused nightmares whenever she found herself thinking of her mother before she fell to sleep.

"Your mother had always warned me of my bad habits," Sir Randal shook his head in shame. "I should have listened to her."

Helena thought of her childhood when her mother had been around and the signs that her father had already begun to show. He had always been a heavy drinker and often loved to gamble, but her mother had kept him in check. She only wished that she could have done the same after her passing. One thing Helena knew was that she had never been as strong as her mother. It shamed her more than she cared to admit.

Unable to think of what to say, Helena instead reached for her father's hand to offer what little comfort she could.

Soon he would be in his cell in the Marshalsea debtors' prison, and she would be on her way to the Tompkins household. It would be a long time before she would see her father again and she feared that his sense might further leave him during that time if she was not around. There was nothing she could do but play out the hand she had been dealt, and so she did not argue further. What good would it have done her anyway?

Chapter 2

(One month later.)

The dinner party that Lord Yarmouth threw in his new Surrey home was fit for a king. One might have never known the devastation that had ensued there a month earlier had the gossip not spread like wildfire throughout the nobility.

From the moment that Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins stepped inside the house, he could not help but think of the family who had once lived there.

He remembered the young girl he had once saved from the back of an unruly horse and couldn't help but think how she had not deserved such awful things to happen to her. Though he had not seen her often, he had known she was a gracious and polite young lady.

Sat at the dining table among the merriment of Lord Yarmouth's guests, Edwin could not hold his tongue. "Lord Yarmouth, might you permit me to ask what became of Sir Randal Ashby and his daughter?"

Quiet fell upon the room and the faces of the noblemen and women dropped at the question. Perhaps it had not been the right time to ask, but the question now hung over them like a blackened storm cloud.

"Sir Randal was taken to Marshalsea to pay off what remained of his

debt," Lord Yarmouth explained before picking up his crystal wine glass to take a sip of ruby liquid.

"And the girl?" Edwin enquired, for it was she that he found himself most concerned about.

"Oh, Lord Edwin, hadn't you heard?" It was Lady Winifred, the lord's daughter, who spoke up with a cheery tone. "She is lady companion to your intended."

Edwin's throat constricted.

"I am not sure of whom you speak." He shook his head and lifted his own glass to hide his embarrassment. Had he shown the slightest recognition, the nobles around the table might have taken it to mean something.

Upon the will of his father, Edwin had started to court the Lady Susan, although he was not aware that they had been betrothed for how could that be so if he had not asked her? In fact, the mere thought of it made him nauseous.

"Please, Lord Edwin. If Lady Susan has her way, the next grand event we attend shall be your wedding," Lady Winifred said. Her smile was outrageous and Edwin struggled not to insist that she stop spreading such idle gossip. He was glad that Lady Susan was not in attendance to argue the case, for he feared that he might have been betrothed by the end of the evening.

Instead, he chose to ignore the lady's comment and he turned back to

her father. "It is a great shame a man of such character could be brought so low."

Edwin had not meant the comment as a slight, but it appeared that the other lords were quick to judge the man in question.

"Character?" one of the other noblemen said. "He was the grandest of fools."

A hushed murmur whispered around the table, no doubt the gossip surrounding Sir Randal and his poor daughter. Edwin often felt disgraced at the company he kept, yet never more so than tonight.

"The man made some terrible decisions, but he was a good man and I believe he was quite humorous at times," Edwin insisted plainly.

"If only he had been able to pay his debts with such humour," Lady Winifred remarked and Edwin decided that he liked her even less for her unkind words. She knew not the hardship that came along with the responsibility of a great fortune.

"He was a mad man to believe he could fit into high society," one of the lords remarked. "The man was broke before he gained his title and broke men will always end up broke again, for he has no idea how to handle a great fortune."

Edwin couldn't help but wonder how the lords around the table had managed their fortune. With their fine clothing and outrageous responses, it was clear that they were as vain as any to believe that the situation that had befallen Sir Randal and his daughter could

never happen to them.

He was saddened by the words and decided it might be better to refrain from making comment again. It was clear that these closed-minded people would not see eye-to-eye with him, no matter how hard he tried to argue his point.

He only wished that Sir Randal had conducted himself differently, for he knew that Miss Helena had not deserved the hand that she had been dealt.

Later that evening, as the ladies retired to the drawing-room, it was Sir Joshua Makepeace who broached the subject again.

"Am I right to understand that you met Lady Susan's lady companion on your last visit there?" he asked, as he swirled a glass of scotch before him, idly watching the amber liquid waves that crashed against the sides. It was a habit that Edwin had come to view as a part of his best friend's character. One that always caused him to smile.

"Yes, though I had not made the connection," Edwin admitted.

He remembered the young woman who had remained distant whenever he had visited Lady Susan. She had been easy on the eye and quite familiar, although Edwin could not have compared her to the young girl he had rescued, for she was stricken with melancholy, the likes of which Edwin had never experienced before.

"Do I remember your words correctly?" Sir Joshua asked curiously. "She was quite comely although rather shy?"

Edwin remembered the conversation he'd had with his friend in the halls of Eton college when he had returned from a visit to see Lady Susan, although until now he had quite forgotten it.

"Yes, she was." Edwin mused simply and lifted his scotch to his lips. The strong liquid burned the back of his throat, though he was glad of the distraction.

"If I do remember correctly, you spoke of her with a great fondness," Sir Joshua chuckled. "Much more fondness than you ever expressed for Lady Susan."

"Perhaps I sensed who the lady was," Edwin shrugged. "Her father may have gambled, but he was always an honest kind of man and it seems that it has brushed off on his daughter."

"Yes, what happened to the Ashbys was a terrible thing but it could not be helped." Sir Joshua sighed as though he was growing tired of the conversation. "By all accounts, the man was never the same after his wife passed away."

The comment caused Edwin to perk up and he quickly enquired, "Whoever said such a thing?"

"My parents," Sir Joshua said. "They were close friends with the

Ashbys while Sir Randal's wife was alive, although they say he became quite lost afterwards."

That was a matter that came too close to home, for Edwin had always worried that he might become lost if he did not find the right woman to anchor him.

He became silent, mulling over his friend's words.

"Speaking of wives," Sir Joshua changed the subject among the silence, "were you true in your speaking of the Lady Susan over dinner?"

Edwin turned his gaze upon his friend and saw a deep curiousness in his eyes that he hadn't seen before.

"I fear that Lady Susan is not the right woman for me," he admitted.

Lady Susan was much too impressed with fine things and gossiping about those who did not have them. He feared that a woman like her at his side might encourage him to spend far too much of his fortune just to keep his marriage a happy one.

"If that be the case then perhaps you might permit me to relieve you of your courting her?" Sir Joshua suggested and surprise overwhelmed Edwin.

"I would warn you against it." Edwin shook his head, for he knew that Sir Joshua was no more likely to tame a woman like Lady Susan than

he was.

"If you insist on continuing to court her, you may want to make your intentions clear," Sir Joshua insisted, and it was clear to Edwin that his friend had taken the wrong end of the stick.

"Lady Susan is quite the catch," Sir Joshua continued. "If you do not hurry, there are a hundred men behind you willing to take up the chance."

Edwin knew that his friend was right, though he could not bring himself to give him the permission he so desperately asked for.

If he gave up his rights to the Lady Susan, he would have a hard time explaining his presence at the Tompkins estate, and he was not quite ready to give that up.

With that knowledge, he knew that if he remained he might say something that he would regret.

Finishing the last dregs of his scotch, he placed the glass on a table and pushed himself to his feet.

"I fear I may have stayed too long," he told his friend. "I should be leaving, as I am to be up early for the journey to the Tompkins estate in the morning."

"Do give my kind regards to Lady Susan," Sir Joshua said.

Edwin simply nodded. He was exhausted by all the gossip that had been spreading throughout dinner and could no longer stand to be around it.

Even as he left, he could hear the hushed whispers and mentions of both the Ashbys and Lady Susan.

Exasperated, he quickly said farewell to Lord Yarmouth and his daughter before departing into the cool night air.

Chapter 3

Miss Helena watched from an upstairs window as the gentleman arrived on horseback. The magnificent black stallion was one she hadn't seen often, although she recognised him all the same.

Lord Edwin had changed in the years since he had saved her from Midnight's flight across his estate, though she could still see in him the young man she had become quite enamoured with.

He sat confidently upon the saddle, as though he had not a care in the world, his thick, dark curls whipped by the breeze as he rode at a steady pace towards the house.

No doubt he had come to call upon Lady Susan, although for one brief moment Helena imagined that he might have been there for her.

She dreamed that he might rescue her from an ivory castle as he had once rescued her from horseback. The thought was both silly and exciting to her.

For a moment, she imagined that she was an eleven-year-old girl again with a girlish crush upon a boy of only sixteen. When she closed her eyes she could imagine how it had felt to have his strong and capable arms around her as he rescued her from Midnight's saddle.

When she thought back, it was his kindness she remembered most.

She remembered how he had smiled at her and invited her to join their party for the picnic. It was a great kindness that she had never forgotten for she rarely saw it, especially now that she found herself as a simple lady's companion.

That small taste of kindness had been the only thing to keep her sane during the long days with which she found herself ridiculed and gossiped about.

Still, high society had not forgotten her misfortune. In fact, Lady Susan had a mind to bring it up with every chance she had, as though it made her seem all the more admirable. Helena couldn't help but think it made her quite the opposite.

Since attending the Tompkins estate, Helena has learnt just how tiresome Lady Susan's gossiping nature could be.

Whenever the occasion arose she found herself forced to listen to the woman's musings on this piece of gossip or that, and she had quite begun to wish that she could block it all out.

With the arrival of Lord Edwin, she hoped she might at least be able to sit through it for she knew it would soon begin.

Almost as she thought of it the bedroom door behind her crashed inwards and Lady Susan frantically charged into the room.

"Miss Helena, you must help me with the fastening on my dress!" Lady Susan exclaimed, and Helena was forced to grit her teeth.

She was not a lady's maid or even any other kind of servant. Yet Lady Susan had taken to treating her as such.

The woman was dressed in a fine pink dress that matched the ribbon tied in her hair. Thick ringlets framed her face and the frills about her neck only added decoration to her womanly figure. She was the picture of beauty and elegance, much like many of the other ladies of the nobility, and Helena couldn't help but begrudge her the fine things she had.

"Hurry now!" Lady Susan insisted, "I must go downstairs to greet Lord Edwin!"

Lady Susan ushered Helena forwards with a frantic wave of her hand and exposed her back to show the lacing at the back of her dress, which was still undone.

"I am sure that your lady's maid would be much more suited to the task," Helena said. She was not likely to help the woman who had so far been unkind to her since she arrived.

"I cannot find her," Lady Susan huffed. "You must do it and be quick about it."

There were several words Helena might have used to show her distaste of the situation, but she was much too gracious and instead set to work on the lady's dress.

She pulled on the lacing, much harder than necessary in the hope that it might make Lady Susan so uncomfortable that she might not ask for her help again.

"Hurry now!" Lady Susan insisted again, glancing out of the window to see just how far Lord Edwin had come down the path.

It was then that Lady Susan's eyes fell upon the upturned book on the window seat that Helena had been reading before she had noticed Lord Edwin's arrival.

"You know, Miss Helena, you really ought to find a better use for your time," Lady Susan commented. "You will not find yourself a husband with your nose in a book."

Helena thought of reminding Lady Susan of a conversation they had once had in which the lady had told her that she might never find a husband with the circumstances of her father being what they were. Instead, she kept her mouth closed and tightened the lacing further.

"I really do not understand what you find so fascinating in those pages." Lady Susan shook her head and her hair bounced joyfully atop her head.

"Perhaps if you ever picked a book up you might learn the fascination," Helena replied.

"And perhaps I would become just as boring as you are, Miss Helena," Lady Susan jibed and Helena struggled not to offer a quick retort.

"You know Miss Helena, you are quite lucky to have your place here at Haddington Hall," Lady Susan said as she inspected herself in the mirror and stroked a stray strand of hair away from her forehead. "You might have found yourself in a squalid cell had it not been for my dear father. I would hate to see you outstay your welcome by not finding yourself a suitable match. You certainly won't find one in that book."

Helena's hands balled into fists at her sides as she tried her hardest not to give Lady Susan the rise she was looking for. No doubt she was simply waiting for a reason for her father to have her dragged out by her ears.

"I thank you for the reminder, Lady Susan," Helena said instead, in the hope that it might anger Lady Susan all the more to believe that she had not affected her in any way.

"I really must be going," Lady Susan flitted to the doorway then. "A lady must never keep a gentleman waiting."

There was a slyness to her smile that Helena wished she could wash away, though she knew it would never be possible, for her position within the household was much too precarious.

She watched Lady Susan disappear and stood stone still for several moments before determining that she would not remain in her room as she had on so many other occasions.

For once she would not give Lady Susan the benefit of Lord Edwin's company alone.

Determined to see him again, she began to make her way through the house and down the stairs. With every step she took closer to him, she could feel her heartbeat growing stronger.

The thought of being in the same room as him caused her to tremble and, before long, she found herself outside the drawing-room door.

The sound of voices coming from inside told her that Lady Susan had already greeted her guest.

The baritone voice of the gentleman that came from within caused Helena's heart to skip a beat.

Again, images of Lord Edwin on that fresh summer's afternoon came swimming back to her. She had never forgotten him and his handsome face, or the fine attitude he had shown towards her.

A craving for just a little kindness to brighten her day was the thing that caused her to reach for the doorknob and enter the room.

The conversation, which had seemed polite but entirely dull, stopped immediately.

Lady Susan, who had been sat on the furthest seat, looked both astonished and angered by her appearance. Yet it was Lord Edwin, seated with his back to her, who stood and turned to greet her almost immediately.

"Miss Helena," he gave her a gracious bow and when he stood again, his smile was as radiant as ever it had been.

Helena quickly gave a low curtsy before she swept across the room to reach for the hand he had offered her.

"Lord Edwin, it is so wonderful to see you again," Helena said as he took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

A tingle of electricity shot up Helena's arm and the warmth in her fingertips caused her to smile all the more.

"Likewise, Miss Helena. It is good to see you looking so well." Lord Edwin examined her closely, although she found that his expression was not at all judgemental in nature. "I do hope that you are being well looked after."

"Lord Tompkins has been quite generous," Miss Helena assured him as he released her hand.

Being so close to him after so long apart was like a breath of fresh air. Helena breathed in deeply the spicy scent of him and committed it to memory, for she feared it might be a while before she could do so again.

"How was Eton college?" Helena asked. "You must tell me all about your Grand Tour! Was Europe as fascinating as they say it is?"

"It was far more fascinating than I could say," Lord Edwin replied. "Though I must admit I am far happier to be home again."

"And I am sure that everyone is glad to have you back." Helena smiled sweetly. She knew that she was certainly glad to see him.

"I am sure that Lord Edwin came with greater expectations than talking of such dull things, Miss Helena," Lady Susan said as she stood to join them in the centre of the room. She stood close to Lord Edwin's side. So close, in fact, that their shoulders were almost touching.

"You will have to excuse my lady companion, Lord Edwin. She does not get out very often and finds the most mundane of things far too interesting."

Helena knew that Lady Susan had become quite defensive simply because she no longer found herself the centre of attention. It wasn't the first time she had experienced the way that Lady Susan tried to embarrass her in front of guests. In fact, it had become quite the reason that she preferred to remain in her bedroom rather than put up with the jibes.

For once Helena was almost sure that her embarrassment would be short-lived, for she knew that Lord Edwin would not stand by idly and listen to it.

"Helena, should you not be helping in the kitchen?" Lady Susan demanded, as though she was trying to make Helena look like just another servant. "Perhaps you might be a dear and fetch Lord Edwin

and me a pot of tea?"

"I am quite sure there is no need for that," Lord Edwin protested, and Helena was pleased as she watched him cross the room to the bell cord so he might alert a kitchen servant to their needs. "Miss Helena need not discomfort herself by going all the way down to the kitchen when we have the means to call a servant."

Lord Edwin turned his gaze to Helena and for just a moment their eyes met. She found amusement in his blue-brown eyes and had to force herself not to smile at the suggestive expression he offered her. The look said he quite loved to annoy Lady Susan just as much as Helena wished that she could.

When she saw Lady Susan pick up on the look that passed between, them she quickly averted her gaze.

The angered expression on her mistress's face told her that she had not looked away quickly enough, and she knew in that moment that Lady Susan had become her most fearsome rival.

Suddenly fearing what the Lady Susan might do if she began to feel any more threatened by her presence, Helena spoke up. "I thank you, Lord Edwin, for thinking of my comfort, but I am very capable of going down to the kitchen."

Lord Edwin looked as though he was about to protest again, but Helena quickly curtsied and began to make her way to the door. "There is no need to drag a servant away from all their hard work. I shall return presently."

Closing the door, Helena paused for just a moment. Eavesdropping was never very ladylike, yet she found that she could not help herself.

Pressing her ear to the hard wood that had been painted a brilliant white, she listened to the voices within.

"Lady Susan, I find your treatment of Miss Helena quite appalling." Lord Edwin was the first to speak and Helena couldn't help but feel a small glimmer of hope. Even in her absence, he felt the need to defend her.

"My treatment of Miss Helena has been nothing but honourable Lord Edwin," Lady Susan said with an incredulous tone. "If it were not for my father placing her here, she would be languishing in a cell beside her own father."

"And what, pray tell, gives you the right to diminish and embarrass the poor woman in such a way?" Lord Edwin demanded.

Helena could not decide what was worse. Lady Susan's cruel excuse for charity or Lord Edwin's pity.

Unable to bear the conversation for a second more, Helena straightened up and made her way down to the kitchen.

Chapter 4

Later that afternoon, Lord Edwin found himself stood outside the study of Lord Tompkins. The door was just barely open and he could hear the sound of almost constantly scribbling as the gentleman went about his work at his desk.

With a deep sigh to brace himself for the soon-to-come conversation, Edwin raised his hand and knocked upon the door.

"Enter!" Lord Tompkins shouted without ever looking up from his desk, as though he expected the disturbance to be one of the servants.

"Lord Tompkins, I thought that I might perhaps have a moment of your time," Edwin said as he entered the room.

"Ahh, Lord Edwin." Lord Tompkins placed his quill upon his desk and stood to greet the gentleman in a more formal fashion. He buttoned up the front of his jacket and straightened it before moving around the desk to shake his hand. "It is a pleasure to see you again."

"And I you, sir." Edwin shook the man's hand fervently.

"What might I do for you this fine afternoon?" Lord Tompkins asked as he gestured for Edwin to take a seat in one of the armchairs that faced his desk. "Might I offer you a drink? A scotch perhaps?"

Edwin watched the gentleman as he crossed the room to the cocktail cabinet to pour himself a glass of amber liquid.

"I thank you sir, but I am quite satisfied after taking tea with Lady Susan," Edwin assured him.

"Ahh, am I to assume that it is she you have come to talk to me about?" Lord Tompkins' words caused Edwin to suck in a breath and he braced himself for what was likely to be an awkward conversation.

"Actually, sir, the lady of whom I am here to talk about is your daughter's lady companion, Miss Helena," Edwin explained. He squared his shoulders to ready for what was to come.

Lord Tompkins, who had been taking a sip of scotch as the younger gentleman spoke, paused and looked at him with a guarded expression.

"What could you possibly need to speak to me about regarding Miss Helena?" Lord Tompkins asked in a manner that told Edwin he was not at all pleased.

Edwin knew what it must have looked like for him to join the man in his study. No doubt he had been expecting Edwin to express his intentions regarding his daughter. After all, there had been enough gossip about the two of them of late.

"I have come to ask you if I might settle Miss Helena's debts," Edwin

explained with his head held high.

The older gentleman's eyes widened and he almost looked as though he might drop his glass.

"Why on earth would you seek to do that?"

"I have heard that Miss Helena's father is not fairing well at Marshalsea and I believe that should the two be reunited, it would be of great comfort to them both." Edwin hoped it would be enough to stop the other lord from asking any more questions on the matter.

"I am afraid I cannot hear of it," Lord Tompkins sighed, to Edwin's disappointment. "My daughter has grown quite fond of Miss Helena in the short time that she has been with us."

Edwin struggled not to scoff at the man's words. He had seen Lady Susan's fondness for himself and he did not like it one bit. In fact, it had been all the more reason for him to find himself before her father now.

"Be that as it may, surely it would be better for both Sir Randal and Miss Helena if their debts could be settled sooner rather than later?" Edwin enquired.

"Though I appreciate your caring, Lord Edwin, Miss Helena's debts will not be paid until she has served out her time here. As for the debts of her father, I do not see how you settling them would do him any good."

"And why might that be?" Edwin asked, although not entirely for Sir Randal's benefit. He could not reveal his true intentions to Lord Tompkins for fear that it might make him even less likely to agree.

"A man like that must be taught a lesson if he is to be prevented from making the same mistake twice," Lord Tompkins informed him.

Edwin wasn't at all sure that it was down to Lord Tompkins to decide on a man's fate in such a way, especially after having been offered a chance to be rid of the matter for good.

"I applaud your willingness to help, Lord Edwin, but I am afraid there is nothing to be done," Lord Tompkins insisted, and it was clear to Edwin that he would get nowhere with the father, as he was just as strong-headed and arrogant as his daughter.

Chapter 5

From the moment that Miss Helena set foot inside Marshalsea, she was quite aggrieved. The state in which the poor languished saddened her heart, and to see her father in such a dreadful situation was almost unbearable.

He sat upon the edge of his bed even as she read from a book that had once been his favourite and barely seemed to notice that she was there.

It had been several days since Lord Edwin's visit to Haddington Hall and she found that the happiness he'd brought to her had all but worn away.

Her tone was dull and uninteresting as she spoke the words she saw upon the pages she had looked upon many times. In fact, she might have recited the story from memory if not for the fact that it helped her to keep her eyes off the dank cell about her.

Though her father had been given private rooms within the prison, they were not much better than the rest of the place. Mould and mildew grew in every crack and crevice within the walls and the sound of dripping water could be heard all about the place.

It was a small wonder her father had developed a deep, chesty cough almost from the moment he had arrived. The air was foul, thick with the smell of things that Helena would rather not think about.

If she had not been so determined to offer her company to her father, she might have stayed away altogether. Though a disgusting place, her visits offered her short respite from Lady Susan's constant cruelty.

She had just turned the page onto another chapter when the door to the cell swung open.

Helena found she was wholly astonished by the man who stepped into the room. So much so that she almost fell from the rickety chair she was sat upon.

Almost knocking over the single candle on the table beside her, she stood to greet Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins.

"Lord Edwin," she curtsied, averting her gaze from him even though she longed so much to look upon his face.

"Miss Helena Ashby." Lord Edwin greeted her with a much cheerier tone than one usually used within the halls of the prison. "Sir Randal."

When Helena straightened up she was gladdened by the fact that her father had stood to greet his guest in a manner much more befitting of his station. Though he was shaky on his legs, he greeted Lord Edwin with a strong handshake. "Lord Edwin. It is so good to see you."

"And I you, sir," Lord Edwin replied happily. "I do hope that I am not disturbing your visit."

When he turned to look upon Helena, she felt her knees begin to tremble and she quickly returned to her seat.

"Of course not, of course not," her father insisted in an almost hysterically happy tone. "Do have a seat, my lord."

Though Helena was disheartened that her father was not so cheery upon her own arrival, she was glad that he seemed much more like his old self.

"Thank you," Lord Edwin said as he took to the only other seat in the room, which was a chair much like the one Helena possessed.

He sat awkwardly, for the chair wobbled. But he did not comment on the fact.

"I am pleased to see that you are being housed as well as one might hope to in your current circumstances," Lord Edwin said, gazing around the room as though it was fit for a king.

Helena was grateful to him for the way that he hoped to lighten her father's stormy mood.

"I have my daughter to thank for that," Sir Randal insisted. "Helena, do be a dear and pour our guest a cup of water."

Helena struggled not to cringe at the way her father had so suddenly begun to act as though they were back in their home in Shere simply having tea with a guest. It was yet another sign she could add to the many that suggested her father had lost his senses.

Instead of commenting, Helena did as her father asked and offered a cup of water to Lord Edwin.

"Thank you," he said warmly, and their gazes met over the cup in such a way that Helena found it hard to pull herself away.

"Might I enquire as to how you managed to have your father housed so well?" Lord Edwin asked. "I have heard such terrible things about this place, although this room is not as I had expected to find it."

"I was able to exchange a piece of my mother's jewellery for a small sum of money with the help of Lord George Yarmouth," Helena explained, and she was pleased to see that there was no judgement in Lord Edwin's gaze.

"My daughter has the most caring nature," Sir Randal put in. "She must have inherited it from her mother."

"Then she is very blessed to have been born to such a woman," Lord Edwin agreed, and Helena couldn't help but blush. "There are many ladies with no such desire to be so caring."

"I fear that is none quite so talented as my dear Helena either," Sir Randal insisted, and Helena got the feeling that her father was trying to get the lord to see something that would never be possible.

He spoke in such a way that reminded her of men trying to find a good husband for their daughter.

Though Lord Edwin was the most worthy of men, she knew that nothing could come of her longing for him, apart from a broken heart. There were far better ladies than her more worthy of his attentions.

"May I enquire of which talents you speak?" Lord Edwin asked with curiosity. He turned his gaze upon Helena, and she felt her entire world shift as their eyes locked once again.

"My Helena is the most marvellous singer," Sir Randal bleated. "She has the voice of a nightingale."

"Perhaps one day you might do me the honour of allowing me to hear your singing?" Lord Edwin asked.

It had been a long time since Helena had felt the joyfulness she needed to sing, and yet the look upon Lord Edwin's face aroused a sense inside her that made her believe it might again one day be possible.

"I had heard a long time ago that you were well educated in the pianoforte?" Sir Randal added. "Perhaps at the next party, the two of you might duet? Though I will be saddened to miss it."

"Perhaps one day we might duet for you once your debt is paid," Lord

Edwin offered, though Helena was not sure what good it would do for her father's debt was only growing with every day spent within the walls of Marshalsea. In fact, she wasn't at all sure how much longer the payments from her mother's bracelet could last.

Her visit to her father that day had been a much more pleasant one than she expected.

For the first time since his incarceration, Helena found that she was not desperate to be gone from the place. And when it was time to leave, she feared her time with Lord Edwin had been cut all too short.

"I must return to Surrey," Helena sighed as she placed the long since forgotten book on the table beside her. The candle that had burnt down had been replaced with a fresh one, thanks to Lord Edwin. The kind gentleman had brought a bundle of supplies, including books and writing supplies so that Sir Randal might better occupy his time. Helena feared it would do little good as her father seemed to return to his grief-stricken stupor as soon as she mentioned her departure.

"Perhaps you might allow me to escort you, as I am heading that way?" Lord Edwin suggested. When he stood he loomed over her like a handsome giant.

Her heart skipped a beat as he gave her the most beautiful of smiles.

"I am not sure that would be appropriate." Helena shook her head. It would not do to find herself alone with a man, even if he was one

such as Lord Edwin.

"If you fear gossip, you have no need, Miss Helena," Lord Edwin insisted almost as though he had read her mind. "My cousin, Lady Claire Littleton, shall be travelling with us. She has been staying with me these past months and I left her in town to do some shopping while I came here."

The prospect of seeing not one but two of the only people among the nobility who had ever been kind to her made Helena's heart soar.

"I would be much more comfortable to know that you weren't travelling alone," Sir Randal put in, as though he hoped to draw the two of them closer.

"Well then, for the sake of my father's sanity, I would be very pleased to ride with you, Lord Edwin."

"I assure you that the pleasure is all mine," Lord Edwin told her before he turned to Sir Randal to shake the man's hands. "Do not despair at your current situation sir. It will not last forever."

Helena was grateful to the man for offering what little hope he could, although she could not see how he believed the situation would be rectified.

"Goodbye, Father." Helena stepped forwards and offered her father a quick embrace. "Do take good care of yourself."

Her father did not attempt to make any promises and she was forced to simply hope that he would be all right without her.

"Miss Helena, do allow me to escort you back into town." Lord Edwin offered her the crook of his elbow as he had done so long ago, and she took it willingly.

Though he had grown into an altogether more athletic man, the arm she felt beneath her hand as he led her from the room was welcomingly familiar. He was as strong and sturdy as ever, walking at a gentle pace so that her shorter legs might more easily keep up.

"I am glad that I found you here today, Miss Helena," Lord Edwin told her as they swept from Marshalsea and out onto the street.

Walking along the cobblestones upon his arm was like a dream come true. Helena revelled in it, for she knew it would be over all too soon.

"Why is that, Lord Edwin?" she asked, turning her face up to him so that she might look upon him from beneath her thick eyelashes.

"Though I loathe to bring it up," Lord Edwin sighed, "I must apologise for Lady Susan's treatment of you during my visit to Haddington Hall."

Helena was taken aback by his words. She had not even imagined that it might bother him so.

"It was through no fault of yours, Lord Edwin," Helena assured him, and she placed her other hand on top of his arm to show that she bore him no ill will.

"And still I must apologise, for I cannot help but feel responsible for the actions of those I keep company with."

"Lady Susan has never really been very kind to anyone below her," Helena pointed out. "As with all the nobility, she has every right to behave in such a way."

Helena blushed at the pity she saw in Lord Edwin's eyes.

"That does not give her reason to treat you so unkindly, and I wish to assure you that she will never again do so in my presence."

Though Helena was pleased with the knowledge, she couldn't help but wonder who might protect her when he wasn't around. Lady Susan's mood had been ever more foul since Helena had overheard his scolding of her.

"I thank you for your kindness, Lord Edwin," she said, rather than voicing her concern.

"It is not simply kindness but human decency, Miss Helena," he said, and she found herself wishing there were more like him in the world.

They were just approaching the centre of town when the door to one

of the shops opened with the jingling of a bell. Helena could not disguise the smile that spread across her face when she saw Lady Claire Littleton exit.

Though older, the woman was just as Helena remembered her. Outwardly pretty, she was the picture of health in a flowing pastel blue dress. Her white-gloved hands were clasped before her in a ladylike fashion as a servant appeared behind her carrying several boxes and bags.

The moment she saw the two of them walking arm-in-arm, her face broke into a magnificent smile. "Lord Edwin, cousin! Do introduce me to your companion."

"Lady Claire, surely you cannot have forgotten Miss Helena," Lord Edwin mused with just as beautiful a smile as her own. "I do believe that the two of you have met several times these last years."

"Oh, of course. How could I have forgotten? Miss Helena, it is so wonderful to see you," Lady Claire said gleefully, and she practically pulled Helena off her feet in a welcoming embrace.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Lady Claire." Helena smiled once she had recovered her breath.

Though she was pleased to see Lady Claire, something over the lady's shoulder had caught her eye in the shop window.

Her heart sunk as she realised that it was the jeweller's store they had stopped in front of.

"Is everything all right, Miss Helena?" Lady Claire asked, her tone darkening with concern. "I fear you have gone terribly pale."

"I am quite well," Helena assured her, though she could not bring herself to take her eyes off the emerald bracelet that was set upon a velvet cushion in the shop's window.

"Miss Helena, is that the bracelet that you mentioned earlier?" Lord Edwin enquired, as though he was following her gaze.

Helena wondered for a moment whether she should lie and simply say that its beauty had caught her eye.

Instead, she nodded. "Yes, my lord, it is."

"Lady Claire, perhaps you might escort Miss Helena to our carriage?" Lord Edwin asked. "I just remembered I have one final errand to run before we go home."

"Of course, cousin. I would be happy to." Lady Claire smiled and offered Helena her arm, much as Lord Edwin had.

For a moment Helena wondered whether she might enquire as to Lord Edwin's errand.

Having decided it was most impolite to do so, she instead took Lady Claire's arm and allowed the woman to guide her away.

The servant followed close behind them and Helena knew that even if she had looked back she would not be able to capture a glimpse of Lord Edwin past all of those packages.

There stood a fine carriage decorated in black velvet and golden tassels that looked as though it would be much more comfortable than the merchant's wagon she had travelled in that morning.

"Do make yourself comfortable," Lady Claire insisted as they climbed into the coach while the servant stowed her packages. "I'm sure Lord Edwin will be along shortly."

Helena settled on the seat beside Lady Claire, although she would have preferred to take the one opposite so that she might find herself beside Lord Edwin for the journey back to Surrey.

"Am I right to remember, Miss Helena, that you were something of a bookworm when last we met?" Lady Claire asked, and Helena could not stop the red that began to flush her cheeks.

"That is correct, my lady, "You remember rightly."

"And do you also write well?" Lady Claire enquired. "It must be so if you always have your nose in the pages of a book."

Helena wondered whether Lady Claire might be making fun of her for her education, but the smile upon the lady's face told her that it was not so."

"I suppose that is correct also," Helena nodded, trying to ignore the loose thread she found upon her dress that might have distracted her from the conversation.

"Then you must come to Lord Edwin's estate to write some letters for me," Lady Claire insisted. "I have never been wonderful at penmanship and you would be doing me a great service."

Helena smiled at the opportunity it presented. The thought of being able to travel away from Haddington Hall for something other than visiting Marshalsea was something Helena did not take lightly.

"Of course, as friends do, I would compensate you for your time and travel," Lady Claire added, as though she needed to sweeten the pot. But Helena was already quite taken with the idea.

To be called a friend by such a noble lady was quite something in itself.

"It would be a pleasure to come and write for you, my lady."

"That is a relief, for there is a certain letter I have been wanting to write," Lady Claire admitted. "You see, there is a gentleman I would very much like to convey my feelings for. But I have not as yet found the right way to do so."

Helena was intrigued by the prospect even more now that she knew the intentions of Lady Claire.

"Might I enquire as to whom you speak?" Helena asked.

"Oh, you must not give me away to my cousin if I should tell you," Lady Claire insisted. She gripped hold of Helena's hands almost as though she was desperate to confide in someone.

"I shall be quiet as the grave on the matter," Helena assured her. It was not every day that Helena found herself in the confidence of a noble lady, especially one who considered her a friend. She would do whatever it took to give the lady her trust.

"I so wish to be courted by Sir Joshua Makepeace," Lady Claire confided. "Though I at first thought him rather tiresome, I have come to find him a perfect gentleman."

Helena was again taken aback by the words. She had met Sir Joshua only once at the hunting picnic when she had been eleven years old. Though she could not claim to know the man, she could attest to his charm and good looks.

The door to the carriage opened and Lord Edwin appeared. The coach shook as he climbed into the seat opposite them.

"I do hope I did not keep you waiting too long," he said as he straightened his coat and the door slammed shut behind him.

The ladies quickly unlocked their entwined hands and instead turned their attention to him. Helena had promised to keep Lady Claire's secret and so she would.

"Of course not," Lady Claire assured him. "In fact, Miss Helena has just agreed to join us in future to pen some letters for me."

"I always knew you were much too lazy to write for yourself," Lord Edwin jibed, although his expression was kind and it was clear there was much affection between the two cousins.

"Perhaps you might also help me decide on which dresses I should choose for our next trip to London," Lady Claire suggested, ignoring her cousin's remark entirely. "It would be wonderful fun to talk of travel and fashion over tea in the garden. Lord Edwin's estate has the most beautiful gardens."

"I would be very pleased to do so," Helena assured her.

It was then that Lady Claire turned to her cousin as the carriage departed the street. "Lord Edwin, I do believe you are smiling like a schoolboy."

Helena turned her gaze on Lord Edwin to see that she was right. He was grinning from ear to ear, gazing back at her so intently that it was almost as though they were alone in the carriage.

"I am quite pleased to hear you talk of such things," Lord Edwin explained. "It is a breath of fresh air compared to the usual gossip."

His smile seemed to brighten as he continued to keep his eyes locked on Helena's and she couldn't help but smile back.

Helena allowed herself a few simple thoughts of fantasy. She imagined what it might be like to be courted by Lord Edwin, to always be the one who earned his beaming smiles. She thought of what it might be like to walk in the garden of his home and talk about all the little things while clutching hold of his arm.

Though they were entirely innocent thoughts, she knew that they were simply a fantasy that would never hold. Lord Edwin was much too high a man for her, and she could never hope to hold his affections in the way that Lady Susan and others of her station might.

Chapter 6

"I am so pleased you managed to convince your cousin to hold the hunt today," Lady Susan smiled devilishly as she greeted Lady Claire the moment they stepped out of the carriage.

Helena remained a little behind, eager to let the noble ladies greet each other first.

"He was quite opposed to the idea until I suggested he invite you and Miss Helena to join us," Lady Claire explained as she offered the other lady a welcoming embrace.

"I am sure we can all assume why," Lady Winifred, who had been stood beside Lady Claire, gave Lady Susan a knowing look and the two of them began to giggle like young girls.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Lady Susan remarked. "We must be careful in what we say, my lady, or we might become the next topic of gossip."

Helena feared that she knew exactly what the two ladies were implying, for Lady Susan had never quite allowed her to forget that the gossip of her being courted by Lord Edwin had been at every party and occasion since he had visited Haddington Hall.

Helena did not wish to get on Lady Susan's bad side and so she never

reminded her that Lord Edwin had scolded her.

"Miss Helena, would you be a dear and fetch my sunhat from the carriage?" Lady Susan asked, though her tone was quite malicious. "I do believe I have forgotten it."

Helena knew from experience that this was simply the first request of menial nature that would come from Lady Susan and she braced herself with a deep intake of breath as she climbed back into the carriage to retrieve the hat for her mistress.

Upon her return, Lady Winifred was the first to acknowledge her. "Miss Helena, I do believe that is a fine dress you are wearing."

Helena was instantly pleased with the comment as she had been gratified when Lady Claire had gifted her the dress during one of her visits to write for her.

As Lady Winifred pointed out, it was a fine dress indeed. The blue and silver damask patterning was like nothing Helena had ever owned before. When she wore it along with her best silver hair ribbon, she could almost believe that she was just another one of the ladies.

"Yes, it is quite lovely," Lady Susan piped up, although her tone was altogether less polite than Lady Winifred's.

"I may be mistaken, though I do believe I have seen it before," Lady Winifred commented, and Helena felt her heart drop. "I do believe it to be one of yours, is it not, Lady Claire?"

Helena struggled not to wince at the sympathetic look Lady Claire awarded her before she nodded. "Yes, I gave the dress to Miss Helena as thanks for helping me with a matter of utmost importance."

The look that passed between Lady Susan and Lady Winifred told Helena that they were about to have a field day with all the new gossip they could concoct about her.

Lady Claire opened her mouth as though she might speak in Helena's defence, but relief came in the form of Lord Edwin, followed graciously by a lady that Helena had never laid eyes upon before.

He was as handsome, if not more so, than Helena had last seen him. Wearing his finest hunting attire, Helena could almost imagine that he was a boy of sixteen again. She longed to ride her father's horse and be rescued by him as she had been all those years ago.

"Lady Claire, Lady Susan, Lady Winifred and Miss Helena, please allow me to introduce Countess Pirelli." Lord Edwin said, putting a halt to the ladies' teasing for a moment.

Countess Pirelli was a beautiful woman with olive skin and raven black hair. Her features were sharp with high cheekbones and thick, perfectly shaped eyebrows.

"Countess Pirelli has come over from Italy to stay with friends due to problems caused by the war," Lord Edwin continued. "I would be most pleased if you ladies would treat her with the same respect as all my other guests."

The way he looked around at them suggested that Helena was another of his guests, although she knew that Lady Susan would do all she could to make it seem less so.

"I am sure that the ladies will be very welcoming," Countess Pirelli said in a heavily accented voice, but Helena was surprised at the high level of English she was able to speak.

"As I would expect them to be," Lord Edwin said, and Helena couldn't help but notice the way his eyes fell upon Lady Susan, as though suggesting that she might be the one to keep an eye on. It was clear he had not forgotten the lady's treatment of her.

"I shall leave you to the capable hands of my guests, Countess Pirelli," Lord Edwin told her. "I must be off to ready for the hunt."

"Of course, my lord. We ladies would not wish to keep you from your horses and hunting." The lady's dark eyes glinted with amusement and Lord Edwin did not seem to take offence at the comment. Instead, he gave a gracious bow and was off again as quickly as he had come.

It was then that Helena determined that, as she had when she was eleven, she would be much better off if she managed to find a place to hide until the hunt had finished.

It was not difficult to find an opportunity to slip away once the hunt

began. Much too ladylike to join the men now that they were older, the ladies settled down for their usual routine of tea and gossip.

Excusing herself for a turn about the garden, Helena was relieved when everyone else deemed it much too warm to join her.

She walked about the garden before she found herself wandering down to the meadow where she'd picnicked with Lord Edwin and his friends so many years ago. She found it untouched and almost as they had left it. The wildflowers were as beautiful as ever, secluded in an outcrop of trees that offered some shade as she settled down on a nearby stump.

The birds sang overhead and a squirrel popped its head from the bushes and made a mad dash to a neighbouring tree. Helena found she was quite comfortable surrounded by nature, for the birds and the bees did not gossip as ladies did. Their low humming was most relaxing, which allowed her brief respite from the busy atmosphere up at the house.

"You know, I have always found your admiration of nature quite endearing." The voice that sounded behind her caused her to jump up from the stump and wipe dried leaves from her dress.

"Lord Edwin!" she exclaimed as she turned to find him watching her from the shade of the nearest tree. She had been so intent on watching the birds and squirrels that she hadn't heard him approach.

Lord Edwin pushed himself off the tree trunk where he had been leaning and wandered closer. "Forgive me for startling you, Miss Helena. It seems I have always had a habit of doing that with you."

Helena's heart hammered in her chest. How had he possibly remembered startling her all those years ago behind the stables?

"Miss Helena, I feel I must commend you for your interests. At every turn you astonish me with your love of reading, writing and singing. And now I find you admiring nature as though you wish to know all there is to know of the world." Lord Edwin's smile made her breathless and she could not for the life of her think of something clever to say.

"I find you are quite the breath of fresh air compared to all the usual gossiping and idleness of the other ladies," Lord Edwin continued to bridge the silence.

"I have always found gossip quite tedious," was all Helena could think to say.

"I agree." Lord Edwin nodded and she was relieved that he did not mention that she often found herself the topic of such gossip.

"Miss Helena, might you accompany me to find a good spot for our picnic?" he asked. "I feel I have need of your keen eye."

Helena was glad of the invitation, yet she couldn't quite remove herself from the fact that Lord Edwin was becoming something of a crutch for her.

"I would be honoured to, my lord." She gave him a small curtsy, having not lost her wits entirely.

"Perhaps you might also permit me to sit with you during the picnic?" Lord Edwin asked, startling her further. "I would not like to see you alone with those gossiping women a moment longer than necessary."

It was then that Helena saw the pity in his eyes and she wondered if he might be beginning to view her as a nuisance, for he was always the one to come to her aid.

"Do not feel that you need to protect me from those women, my lord."

"I am well aware that you are quite capable of handling yourself in a dignified manner," Lord Edwin mused. "Though I would still be glad of the honour to sit beside you."

His words washed over her and for a moment she allowed herself to imagine what it might be like to have this man fall in love with her. The way he spoke suggested obvious affection, though she knew that the lord was much too smart and much too high in station to allow himself to do so.

He would likely fall for a grand lady who could offer him so much more than she could, especially when it came to breeding. Though she knew it was not possible, she still imagined it and she couldn't help but smile at how wonderful it felt.

The words she might have heard from his lips if he fell for her were tantalisingly sweet and she knew that if he uttered them even once, she would be deliriously happy for the rest of her life. To have loved and been loved by this man was a sweetness she could never hope to

experience.

Helena suddenly feared that she might never know the beauty of being loved for she was an outcast among society, a fish out of water with no hope of finding the thing she needed most to become afloat again. Her hopes in Lord Edwin were unfounded, for she knew he could never love her as she loved him.

She also feared the lonely road ahead at the thought that there might never be a man to love her the way that men loved women in the hundreds of novels she had pawed through over the years. The love stories with which she had been enthralled were a far cry from her own life.

"Is something the matter?" Lord Edwin asked, breaking her train of thought and scattering her fantasy to the wind.

Helena blushed as she realised that every thought must be written in her expression. She never had been very good at disguising her emotions, even though she had grown capable of not voicing them.

"Lord Edwin, may I ask you something?" Perhaps all might not be lost. Though she could not have him, she might at least find some happiness with someone else.

"Of course, Miss Helena, anything," Lord Edwin breathed, and she felt him draw closer as he spoke. His interest in their conversation was clear on his handsome face and Helena longed to reach out and touch his cheek.

"Do you believe that a marriage must have a certain amount of affection if it is to succeed?" Helena asked, and blushed all the more, for she knew it was the silliest of questions.

Lord Edwin looked taken aback by her question and Helena wondered whether she might have spoken out of turn. Perhaps her question had been far too forward.

"Yes, Helena. Though I fear for us a marriage must appear to succeed even if it is doomed from the very beginning," Lord Edwin sighed. It was clear he had much on his mind. "For high society, marriage is very much about breeding and status. I very much fear that those things can get in the way of affection and furthering one's feelings."

He spoke almost as though he felt much the same as she did. Lord Edwin had never struck her as a man who cared for such things, but she should have guessed. He was far too kind not to consider one's feelings.

Helena realised that Edwin had a better grasp on the subject than she had given him credit for. The candle of hope was once more lit inside her. Perhaps if he felt that way, she might find another more suited to her who felt the same.

"Do you believe that you might find affection?" Helena asked before she knew what she was saying. She could only be glad that she hadn't mentioned the word love, for she imagined the concept might frighten him away.

"I do believe, Miss Helena, that I might." Lord Edwin smiled warmly. She wondered whether he might be thinking of Lady Susan.

It was a barb in her heart that stung like a bee sting, although she did wish for him to be happy. She could not wish the same for herself for fear she might never satisfy such a desire. It was far better to accept her fate than hope for more. At least then she might one day find some semblance of happiness.

All she could currently hope for was the chance to spend more time with Lord Edwin while she still had the chance. She knew that as time went on, the need for him to marry would become more apparent, and when he did, she would find herself quite alone again.

Almost half an hour later Helena found herself back among the noblemen and women who

were gathering for the picnic. She had helped Lord Edwin find a spot close to where their original picnic had been held, and she was pleased with the result.

Settled beside a babbling brook that ran along the edge of the meadow, she could watch as several of the younger nobles played merrily about the water.

To her relief, Lord Edwin kept his promise of sitting beside her, though she found that his attentions were mainly focused elsewhere now that there were so many others to talk to.

She did not mind it, however, for as long as he was close by she was content. Her ability to watch him from the corner of her eye was something she did furtively.

"I find the day is much too quiet," Lady Susan's voice was grating as ever and Helena was fearful of what she might have chosen as her next point of embarrassment. "Miss Helena, I know that you are likely to only know a few dining room songs, but I believe you must sing for us to lift our spirits."

A lump formed in Helena's throat at the suggestion, and she thought of the conversation she'd had during her trip to Marshalsea in which her father had assured Lord Edwin that she had the voice of a nightingale. She had hoped that she might have more time to prepare herself for such things, but it seemed that God was not on her side.

"Lady Susan, you must not put Miss Helena on the spot in such a manner," Lord Edwin protested, and Helena was grateful.

"Oh, don't be silly." Lady Susan rolled her eyes. "I am sure that Helena could come up with some jolly tune for us all."

"I'm sure that Lady Susan is right."

It was Lady Claire who spoke up then, and when Helena turned her gaze upon her she found her smiling back in an affectionate manner.

"I have heard tell that Miss Helena is quite the accomplished singer," she continued, and while Lady Claire did not reveal from where she had discovered such knowledge, Helena was quite certain that it must

have come from Lord Edwin himself. That thought made her want to smile, but she was much too embarrassed.

"Come, Miss Helena, do sing for us," Lady Susan insisted in a barbed tone, which suggested she was simply waiting for Helena to make a fool of herself.

Helena decided quickly that she would not give Lady Susan the satisfaction.

She closed her eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and started to sing the most beautiful song she knew.

Starting quietly and shakily, she feared she might have reached too high. But when she opened her eyes to see them all staring at her, it was Lord Edwin's gaze that spurred her on.

He gave her a kind smile, even as Lady Susan whispered something in Lady Winifred's ear that caused them both to titter.

"What a beautiful song," Lady Claire remarked. But still it was Lord Edwin's gaze Helena stole and locked onto as she sang.

The gaze he returned was one Helena might remember forever.

Careful not to let the others in on their connection, she gazed around the rest of the group as her voice grew with confidence. When she caught Lady Susan's eye, she found the woman's face was a mask of

astonishment.

The lady's plan to embarrass her had quite obviously backfired, and Lady Susan did not look pleased at all.

Helena knew that she would feel Lady Susan's wrath when they returned to Haddington Hall, but for the moment she relished the entranced expressions of Lord Edwin and the others around her. The world began to melt away as she sang until all she could see was Lord Edwin's face smiling before her.

Knowing that she had quite destroyed Lady Susan's plan to embarrass her, caring only for Lord Edwin's opinion, she couldn't help but feel proud of herself.

The moment she finished the song a round of applause broke the silence.

"That was beautiful, Miss Helena!" Lady Claire called, as she joined Lord Edwin and Sir Joshua in clapping.

"Absolutely marvellous!" Sir Joshua agreed.

Though Lord Edwin was quiet in his approval, she could see the expression on his face that told her he was besotted with her voice.

The shocked look on Lady Winifred's face and that of boiling anger on Lady Susan's were enough to make Helena's entire day.

It was long after Helena had finished singing that they began to make their way back to the house. The last light of day shone down on them from a sky slowly turning orange, and Helena wished that she could have shared it with Lord Edwin. To her dismay, however, Lady Susan quickly grabbed his arm, a spiteful glare on her face. Helena tried not to let it get to her as she picked up the now empty picnic basket.

"Miss Helena, a lady must not carry such things."

It was Sir Joshua Makepeace who took the basket from her with a kind smile.

As if noticing the way that she watched Lord Edwin and Lady Susan, he added in a whisper, "Do not worry. I have it on good authority that my friend only puts up with her out of obligation."

Helena couldn't help but blush. She hadn't meant to make it so obvious.

"Might I escort you back to the house on Lord Edwin's behalf?" he asked, offering her his arm.

"Thank you, Sir Joshua, but I believe I would be happy to walk alone," Helena replied politely when she felt Lady Claire hovering close by. "Perhaps Lady Claire would wish for some company."

Helena thought she saw Sir Joshua blush as he turned to offer Lady Claire his arm in her stead.

"Thank you," Lady Claire mouthed to Helena, careful not to allow the nobleman to see.

Helena walked alone behind the group, grateful that Lady Winifred had taken it upon herself to find another gentleman to walk with. The last thing she wanted was Lady Susan's little sheep bothering her.

It wasn't until they were halfway back to the house when she felt somebody slip their hand into the crook of her arm. Startled, she looked around to see Countess Pirelli smiling back at her.

"Miss Helena, I feel I must commend you upon your singing," the countess declared. "Your voice is quite beautiful."

"Thank you, Countess Pirelli."

"Please, call me Lady Isabelle, as all my friends do," she insisted, and Helena couldn't help but smile.

Never in a million years had she imagined that she might call a countess a friend.

"I must ask," Lady Isabelle said as they wandered up the path, "have you ever considered a career in singing?"

Helena was taken aback by the question. Of course she had never imagined such a thing.

"Lady Isabelle, I would remind you that a vocation of such means is not dignified among the nobility," Helena said simply. Although now that Lady Isabelle had brought it up, she couldn't help but wonder on it.

"Forgive me for saying, but I do believe you would have a much happier life on stage than running around at Lady Susan's every barking order." Lady Isabelle appeared not to be concerned with mincing her words to fit in with the usual politeness of the nobility.

Helena had to admit it was refreshing to hear somebody speak their mind for once.

"I can't say I have ever really thought about it," Helena admitted.

"Perhaps you should," Lady Isabelle replied. "A talent such as yours will go to waste in a place like this."

"You really believe that I am that good?" Helena asked, surprised.

"My dear, I am Italian," Lady Isabelle pointed out. "We have some of the best singers in the world and I do believe that not a one could

hold a candle to your voice.

"I am to host a party at my gracious friend, Lord Yarmouth's home in Shere next week, perhaps you have been?" Lady Isabelle asked, and Helena felt her heart sink at the mention of her old home. For once she was glad that somebody hadn't made the connection. Perhaps that meant that the gossip about her and her father had started to die down.

"Yes, I do believe I have," she replied.

"Then you must come and sing for us all," Lady Isabelle said strictly, as though there was no room for refusal.

That was high praise indeed and Helena found herself blushing all the way back to the manor. It wasn't until she climbed into the carriage to make the journey back to Haddington Hall that Helena's happiness began to fade.

She was still smiling as she sat on the cushioned bench, but the moment Lady Susan entered she knew it would be short-lived.

"What are you smiling about?" Lady Susan demanded in such a harsh tone that Helena couldn't help but wince.

"It is nothing," she insisted and averted her gaze from Lady Susan's. Yet it appeared that the noblewoman wasn't about to give up.

“Were you trying to make a fool of me back there, Miss Helena?” the lady demanded, and Helena’s gaze flew back to the woman’s face to find that she looked angrier than ever. “I had never heard you sing before today.”

“Perhaps that is because you never asked me to before today,” Helena pointed out, although she knew it was dangerous to goad the woman. She knew that from the moment Lady Susan had requested that she sing it was because she believed she would make a fool of herself. It appeared that Lady Susan believed her plan had slammed back at her.

“Do you believe that I am a fool, Miss Helena? Do you believe that I don’t see what you are trying to do?” Lady Susan demanded, her face as red as a cherry as she tightened her hands into fists on the cushioned bench and leaned towards Helena.

“I’m not at all sure what you mean,” Helena shook her head and forced herself not to lean backwards. She would not allow Lady Susan to see how much she intimidated her.

“Then it is you who are the fool,” Lady Susan’s voice was filled with amusement now, although it was still tinged with anger. “You think I don’t see how close you are trying to get to Lord Edwin.”

Helena blushed. “I’m not trying to get close to anyone,” she protested, but the expression on Lady Susan’s face told her that she didn’t believe a word.

“You are a conniving little shrew and I won’t allow you to get your claws into him,” Lady Susan snapped just as the coach moved away from Lord Edwin’s estate.

Helena was even more fearful then, knowing that if she needed to get away from Lady Susan she would have to throw herself from a moving carriage.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Helena insisted, although it appeared that her innocent reply only made Lady Susan angrier.

“You would do well to remember your station,” Lady Susan warned in an altogether harsher tone than before. She smiled sadistically as she added, “Your father may have been knighted, but you are still a commoner and you have no hope of securing yourself a lordly husband.”

Helena blanched. It wasn’t often that the nobles spoke of her station to her face. In fact, whenever she caught them gossiping, they usually became silent or changed the subject. Yet it seemed that in the privacy of the carriage, Lady Susan wasn’t at all worried that she might be overheard.

“You will stay away from Lord Edwin if you know what is good for you,” Lady Susan continued when Helena remained silent. “He is destined to be with a great lady.”

The way she lifted her head proudly told Helena that she thought that great lady should be her. It made Helena sick to her stomach to think that Lady Susan had her eyes set upon Lord Edwin for her husband. She could only imagine the kind of misery she would inflict upon him.

Chapter 7

Returning to her old home after so long away was more painful than Helena could have imagined. Although the decor had been changed and the occupants' things had replaced hers and her father's, the air about the place was just as it had always been.

Though now filled with people as it had very rarely been during her time there, she still got a sense of the home it had once been to her.

The thought of having to leave again at night's end was almost too painful. Even more distasteful was that it was Lady Winifred who now called this house her home.

The lady herself was stood at the doorway beside her father to greet their guests.

Helena had been forced to shake the hand of Lord Yarmouth and embrace his daughter upon arrival. She had gritted her teeth through the entire ordeal before taking herself to a quiet corner where she might better prepare herself for the evening to come.

Countess Pirelli had not forgotten her request for Helena to sing, as she had received a letter only a few days earlier to ensure that she prepared herself. Helena wasn't at all sure she was ready to sing in front of the entire county's nobility. But knowing that the countess was counting on her made her at least want to try.

Helena was just beginning to think she might be able to creep off for some time alone to prepare herself, when she caught sight of Lord Edwin escorting his cousin, Lady Claire, through the front entrance of the house.

Lady Claire was dressed in a beautiful velvet red dress and the ruby tiara in her hair matched almost perfectly. Her hair was pinned atop her head while several curls had been left to fall strategically at the nape of her neck and framing her face. If Helena hadn't known better she might have said she was a princess.

Though Lady Claire was beautiful, it was Lord Edwin's appearance that caught her off-guard.

His freshly trimmed hair was swept back from his face and his blue-brown eyes appeared more striking than ever. Perhaps it was the purple material of his surcoat or the silver thread tying it all together. He stood out of the crowd of other men who all seemed to be wearing red, yellow, orange or green.

Everything about him talked of money and wealth, even the silver chain that hung from his pocket that was most likely attached to his pocket-watch. He was even more dazzling than usual, and Helena found she was breathless as the cousins made their way towards her.

"Miss Helena! It is so wonderful to see you again," Lady Claire said with elation as though it hadn't been only three days since they had met for one of their private letter-writing visits.

"Lady Claire, Lord Edwin," Helena curtsied low, forcing herself to avert her eyes from the man who had held her attention since the

moment he entered the room. "It is lovely to see you both again."

"You are looking well," Lord Edwin greeted her, with a genuinely friendly smile, and Helena felt her heart skip a beat.

"As are you, Lord Edwin." Helena couldn't stop the corner of her lips from curling upwards into a smile even as her cheeks began to blush at his attention.

"I love your dress, Miss Helena," Lady Claire said, and Helena glanced down at the old violet ball gown that had been the last outfit her father had ever purchased for her. Though she had worn it several times, it had fared well, as had the matching ribbon now tying back her flowing brunette curls.

"You must tell me where you got it from!" Lady Claire insisted, gripping hold of Helena's arm and dragging her away from Lord Edwin. Under her breath she added, "I must speak with you."

Helena found herself glancing over her shoulder to see that Lady Susan had quickly taken her place beside Lord Edwin. The realisation caused her stomach to ache, but there was nothing to be done.

"Is something the matter?" Helena asked, turning her full attention to Lady Claire.

"You are amazing, Miss Helena, did you know that?" Lady Claire's hand tightened around her arm with excitement and she looked as though her emotions were close to bubbling over.

"What on earth have I done?" Helena couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at her friend.

"Your letters, Miss Helena!" Lady Claire exclaimed. "They have worked wonders."

Helena knew immediately of which letters she spoke. Although she had written many correspondences for Lady Claire, she knew of only one recipient who might make her so excited.

"You must tell me at once," Helena pleaded, desperate for some good news.

"Sir Joshua was so enamoured by my letters he has agreed to begin a courtship!" Lady Claire's voice was a pitch higher than usual, and it was clear that she had never been so excited in her life.

"That is wonderful news, Lady Claire," Helena said, and she couldn't help but wonder what it might feel like if she could say the same thing about Lord Edwin.

Yet no matter how much she wished it, she knew it would never come true. She could hear Lady Susan laughing all too loudly at something Lord Edwin had said. The noise was so grating that Helena struggled not to squirm.

"I have something for you," Lady Claire said, reaching into the small velvet bag that was tied about her wrist. "A token of my gratitude."

"Oh, Lady Claire, I couldn't possibly accept." She shook her head as soon as she saw the purple ribbon necklace that held a single diamond droplet.

"You must!" Lady Claire insisted, tying it about Helena's neck before she could do anything to stop her. "It will go perfectly with your dress."

Once she had tied it, Lady Claire stepped back to admire the necklace and nodded in approval.

"Are you well, Miss Helena?" Lady Claire asked as she lifted her eyes from the necklace to examine her face. "You are terribly pale."

"I wish I could assure you that I am quite well," Helena admitted shyly, "though I fear I am sick with nerves."

"Whatever for?" Lady Claire looked concerned and Helena was grateful to her friend for caring.

"Countess Pirelli has requested that I sing tonight," Helena said, and turned her attention to the crowd of people beginning to gather in the hallway, "I fear I will embarrass myself in front of all these people."

"Do not fear such things!" Lady Claire shook her head. "Your singing at the picnic last week was beautiful. If you keep to the same standard, I am sure your performance will be breathtaking."

Helena wished she could have the same confidence in herself that Lady Claire had. Perhaps then she might be less nervous.

Their conversation was brought abruptly to an end by the voice of one of the servants. "Please stand and receive your gracious host, Countess Pirelli!" His voice rang out through the hall causing everyone to grow silent.

Helena paused and followed the gazes of everyone else to the grand staircase, where the countess had appeared. She swept down the steps with the help of a handmaid, who carried the train of her ball gown closely behind her.

Helena was taken aback by the woman's beauty, for she was even more magnificent than the last time she had seen her.

Dressed in a midnight-black gown that shimmered with silver patterning as though made from the sky itself, Countess Pirelli caused an uproar of muttering throughout the crowd awaiting her. The tiara upon her head was set in place by a tall mound of hair, and ringlets that framed her beautiful olive face.

"She is quite beautiful," Lady Claire commented, although Helena did not feel that the words did the countess justice, for she was breathtaking and had stolen the attention of every single man in the room.

Helena could never hope to gain such attention, but she found she would be happy if even one man looked at her the way every single

one of them was gazing at the countess.

Helena was most surprised when Countess Pirelli slipped through the crowd and headed in their direction. Though she stopped along the way to offer greetings to several of the other nobles, it wasn't until she reached Lady Claire and Helena that she took a proper pause.

"Miss Helena, I am so glad to see that you accepted my invitation," the countess said, shocking Helena by embracing her before taking her by the shoulders and examining her closely. "You are looking quite pretty this evening, my dear. I do hope you will take me up on the second half of my request."

Helena blushed, knowing exactly to which request she referred.

"Of course, Miss Helena would be more than happy to sing for us all this evening," Lady Claire agreed before Helena had the slightest idea of what to say.

She had hoped that she might have been able to get out of the engagement, even more so now that she saw how many people were in attendance. The room was still filling up and Helena feared she was going to have to sing in front of more than thirty people. It seemed the countess had many more friends in England than Helena realised.

"You are pleased to sing for us, aren't you, Miss Helena?" Lady Claire placed a hand on Helena's forearm as though urging her to say yes.

"I would be delighted." Helena forced the words out, even though the nerves deep within her were making her nauseous. Accepting the

proposal days ago was much different to the closeness of the engagement now.

Chapter 8

Lord Edwin found that all the gossip and niceties of the evening were too much for him. As soon as he saw his chance, he slipped into the library in the hope of finding a moment's peace. He poured himself a glass of scotch from the cocktail cabinet beside Lord Yarmouth's desk and took to the couch in the hope of resting his poor feet.

Soon dinner would be called and he would have to put up with the idle chatter once again. But, for now, he was quite content with his own company. When he heard the door behind him click shut, he realised he wasn't quite as alone as he had hoped.

For one brief moment, he feared that Lady Susan might have come to annoy him further. He couldn't bear the thought of having to put up with her in private, and he stood up intending to quickly excuse himself.

The woman who stood before him was most certainly not Lady Susan but her lady companion Miss Helena. Dressed in violet with her hair pulled back from her face, Edwin couldn't help but think she was the most dazzling creature he had ever laid eyes upon.

"Miss Helena," he greeted with a polite bow of his head. "Forgive me. I thought I was alone."

"Lord Edwin!" she exclaimed, and the expression she offered told that she was just as startled to see him. "Forgive me. I wasn't aware that anyone was in here."

Helena looked as though she might suddenly flit away like a startled bird.

"Please, do not leave," Edwin insisted as he took a step forwards to offer her his hand. "I would be glad of the company."

Helena's cheeks blushed a cherry red and he was fearful that she might attempt to decline his offer.

"Please, do sit with me," he insisted and gestured her to the couch.

He was more than a little relieved when she took his hand and allowed him to guide her down into the seat.

"I have noticed that you have a habit of hiding during big occasions," Edwin chuckled as he settled down beside her and placed his drink on the side table.

"I fear it is because I do not really fit in among such grand occasions," Helena admitted, continuing to blush.

"I, for one, am glad that you do not fit in," Edwin sighed. "I could not bear it if you were the same as the rest of them. All their gossip and small talk is quite mind-numbing."

Helena giggled pleasantly and Edwin found himself watching the soft plains of her face as she smiled at him. It was a sight for sore eyes to see such beauty and obvious happiness.

"I hoped I might find a few moments alone before the dinner began," Helena confessed. "All too soon I shall be up in front of all those people."

"What do you mean?" Edwin asked. "This is not any court trial. It is just a dinner."

Helena laughed, as though she found his comment quite amusing.

"Countess Pirelli has requested that I offer some entertainment in the form of singing," Helena explained, and the thought of hearing her sing again made his heart soar.

"Oh, Helena, you must not fret on such things," he insisted, reaching out to hold her hand. "Your singing voice is even more beautiful than you are." Helena looked shocked at his words and he quickly added, "Do not tell me that nobody has ever called you beauty."

"I fear that they have not." Helena averted her gaze from his and her cheeks continued to flush.

Holding his breath, Edwin reached out to take hold of her chin and pull her gaze back to his. "Helena, I assure you that you are the most beautiful and remarkable young woman I have ever laid eyes upon."

Her breath released as an almost whisper through her lips, and her gaze became dazed as she stared back at him.

The softness of her chin against his fingertips made him want to touch her more and his hand travelled to her cheek so that he might cup her face.

"Helena, I fear that my affections for you are not entirely innocent," Edwin admitted as he stroked her cheek with the ball of his thumb, desperate to remember the feel of her skin. "I find I am quite taken by you."

Helena's eyelashes fluttered and he knew that she could never look any more beautiful than she did that night.

"You must sing, for I fear if I do not hear your voice I might die." He continued for fear that if he stopped she might pull away.

"I would not wish for you to die, Lord Edwin." Helena smiled and reached up to take hold of his hand.

Though she pulled his touch from her cheek, she clutched his fingertips as though she could not bear the thought of letting go.

"Then you will sing for us?" he asked, hopeful.

"I will sing for you," she promised, and his heart soared higher.

"I do believe that it shall be the highlight of my night." Edwin smiled back at her.

"How could I deny you something so obviously desired?" Helena asked, and Edwin thought that he had read those words in one of the letters he had found upon his best friend's desk a few days earlier.

Though he had not had time to read the entire thing or look at the signature at the bottom, he remembered reading a similar phrase. The letter had so obviously been from a love interest. His heart squeezed at the thought. Had Helena been the one to send his friend such a letter?

Sitting at the dining table that evening, Edwin found that he was unable to stop glancing in Miss Helena's direction. She sat quietly, barely entering into the conversation that was spreading around the table.

He admired her for her lack of willingness to join in. She was unlike any other woman at the table and he found her quite intriguing.

"Miss Helena, Countess Pirelli has told me that you are going to be singing for us this evening?" It was Sir Joshua who was one of the first to address the young lady directly.

She looked up from her meal as though quite in shock to be singled out. Edwin could only hope that his friend was not about to make fun of her as Lady Susan and Lady Winifred had tried to do at the picnic.

“That is correct, Sir Joshua,” Miss Helena replied.

“I do hope that you are going to be less shaky this evening,” Lady Susan put in, a few seats away from Miss Helena. She leaned forward so that she was able to look at her passed the nobles who sat between them. “Your performance at the picnic was quite mediocre.”

Miss Helena turned her gaze back down to her plate as though she would not defend herself against Lady Susan’s accusation. Then she breathed in deeply and began to speak.

“I was not aware that you were a professional on such matters, Lady Susan.”

Edwin struggled not to laugh, and instead lifted his soup spoon to his lips to hide his amusement.

Lady Susan looked mildly shocked by Miss Helena’s comment.

“I do believe that Miss Helena’s performance at the picnic was quite beautiful,” Sir Joshua said, saying the words that Edwin had hoped to say himself had it not been for fear of beginning gossip. The last thing he wanted was to get between Lady Susan and Miss Helena when people were already gossiping about him courting the former.

He sent a grateful glance to his friend down the table and Sir Joshua offered him a curt nod in response.

“I am sure that Miss Helena has a lovely singing voice.” It was Lord Yarmouth who spoke up from the head of the table. “I have heard from her father that she is quite the nightingale.”

“Sir Randal and I have had a similar conversation,” Edwin finally put in, relieved that he could back up the tales of another noble rather than being the only one to defend the young woman.

“I fear that my father speaks all too highly of me,” Miss Helena said in such a shy manner that Edwin couldn’t help but look at her again.

The beauty he found in her blushing face was quite astonishing and he had to turn his attention back to his soup before anyone else at the table noticed.

“Your father is many things,” Lord Yarmouth insisted. “A liar is not one of them. I, for one, believe that you will do your father’s words justice.”

“I heartily agree with you, Lord Yarmouth,” Sir Joshua nodded.

The servants arrived to remove the bowls of the first course ready for the main meal, and the talk at the table turned to other topics.

It seemed that Miss Helena was quite relieved to have the spotlight stolen from her.

After dinner was finished, the guests retired to the ballroom, which had once been merely a sitting room during Sir Randal's time as the house's owner. Now, though, it comprised a large pianoforte and an open floor, where many of the guests milled in small groups.

"Lords, ladies and gentleman, if I might have your attention?" Countess Pirelli spoke up loudly from beside the piano. "I would like you all to welcome my guest, Miss Helena Ashby, who has graciously agreed to sing for our entertainment this evening."

Countess Pirelli gestured to the young lady, who stood a little way off. Edwin watched her cross the room, applauded by several of the nobles while others spoke in hushed whispers. The loudest of the whisperers was Lady Susan, who hummed something derogatory into Lady Winifred's ear. They were standing only a few inches away from him.

Anger rose inside him but he quickly turned his attention back to Miss Helena.

"Perhaps we might have a volunteer to play the pianoforte for Miss Helena?" Countess Pirelli suggested as the room grew silent again.

Miss Helena looked out at the crowd as though fearful that nobody would offer their services.

Remembering the hope of Miss Helena's father in his cell at Marshalsea, Edwin stepped forwards. "I would be honoured if Miss Helena would have me?"

Although he gazed at her it was Countess Pirelli who accepted. "Wonderful!" She clapped her hands together and stepped out of the way so that Edwin might take his place upon the pianoforte's stool.

As he sat down, he couldn't help but notice Lady Susan's disgusted expression and he found he was even happier to offer his services.

"Did you have a song in mind?" Edwin asked Miss Helena, offering her all of his attention.

"You choose," she smiled back at him.

He thought for only a moment before beginning to play the music to the song she had sung at the picnic.

When Miss Helena began to sing he found he was quite captivated by her voice. She sang even more beautifully than she had on the day of the picnic.

As his fingers flew over the keys, he admired her face and the expression of happiness he found there. The crowd had grown entirely silent, listening to her with obvious curiosity.

The more Edwin watched her, the more the rest of the room seemed to melt away. For a few minutes, he imagined that they were alone again, and when she turned her gaze upon him, he felt as though she was singing just for him.

Every single word she sang was another layer of happiness upon his heart, and it was right then that his mind was made up. He would not sit idly by and watch her slip away from him. There was no reason in the world that he could think of not to attempt to court her.

Though her station in society was unsettled and she was no great lady, he could without a doubt say that she would make a wonderful one. She had more grace and class than most of the ladies in the room had they all been put together as one.

That was enough for Edwin even without her beauty and love of small things. He determined that he might never be happy unless he told her how he felt.

It wasn't until their act was finished that Edwin found himself seeking her out. Upon finishing her song, she disappeared into a crowd of people, all desperate to show their appreciation of her voice.

Before he found her again, he felt a hand land on his forearm and turned to find Sir Joshua standing behind him.

"Lord Edwin, I fear I must apologise for not seeking you out sooner,"

his friend sighed. "I have been quite distracted this evening."

Edwin had a good sense that he well knew the feeling of being distracted, although he wasn't sure whether they held the same reason.

"I assure you that you have my forgiveness, sir," Edwin told Sir Joshua as he scanned the room for a glimpse of the lady who had stolen his heart.

"My dear friend, I fear I must speak with you," Sir Joshua insisted, and Edwin's attention returned to his friend.

The expression on his face was only mildly concerning, though Edwin feared immediately that something might be wrong. "Of course, what is it?" he asked.

"Lord Edwin, I am frightfully concerned that I may have entered into something you would not approve of." Sir Joshua sighed deeply and Edwin was immediately fearful that their conversation might have something to do with Miss Helena.

"I may not offer my forgiveness until you tell me what this concerns," Edwin pointed out, although he was not at all sure he could handle what his friend was about to tell him.

"I am sure you remember that upon our last visit I mentioned my courting one of the ladies we are acquainted with." Sir Joshua seemed to be treading tentatively now. "And I fear I must admit her identity to you before I may take our courtship any further."

"Of course." Edwin nodded. He did so wish that his friend would simply come out with it.

"I have entered into a courtship with your cousin, Lady Claire Littleton." Sir Joshua's face flinched, almost as though he believed that Edwin might strike him.

Relief overwhelmed Edwin so entirely that he found himself wrapping Joshua in a brotherly embrace. "You have my utmost blessing, dear friend!"

"Then you are not angry?" Sir Joshua sounded startled and looked as though he might topple over as Edwin released him from his embrace.

"How could I possibly be angry?" Edwin asked. "I wish you both all the happiness in the world." He was smiling like a damned fool now as he realised that his worries had been completely unfounded.

"Good, because I fear that Lady Claire's letters to me have been so elegant and enchanting that I might never have been able to forget them had you disapproved," Sir Joshua explained, and everything started to make sense.

He remembered the afternoon in the carriage when Lady Claire had announced that Miss Helena would be helping her. That had to have been the reason why Miss Helena's words had seemed so familiar in the library. It was a wondrous relief to know that she had simply been writing such letters on behalf of his cousin.

"Please excuse me, Sir Joshua," Edwin said, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "I do believe I have some urgent business I must attend to."

Even as he turned to see Miss Helena on the other side of the room, he realised that tonight might not be the best night to speak to her on such matters.

He watched as she opened the letter that Lord Yarmouth presented to her and his heart dropped even as her expression did. Her eyes began to shimmer with tears, and she swept from the room before he could even take a step towards her.

Whatever he had been hoping to say to her, he knew that it must wait.

"Lord Edwin," the grating voice of Lady Susan came to him from behind and he turned to find her standing before him. "I was hoping that you might take me for a walk around the garden. I have heard tell that the rose bushes are quite beautiful in the moonlight."

Edwin struggled not to visibly squirm in front of her. He could think of nothing worse than spending time in her company, and yet he could feel the eyes of several nobles watching them for how he might react.

"I would be pleased to, Lady Susan," he said as he offered her his elbow, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Lady Susan took his elbow all too willingly and he led her towards the

doors that were open to the garden beyond the house.

Outside, several other guests milled about the patio and the garden, conversing over subjects that were of little consequence to him.

As he guided Lady Susan around the gardens, he could not help but think about the shock that had been written plainly on Miss Helena's face when she had received the letter from Lord Yarmouth.

"What do you think, Lord Edwin?" Lady Susan asked, as though she had been talking to him quite enthusiastically.

He turned his attention to the shorter lady and realised he had been so caught up in his own thoughts that he hadn't heard her at all.

"I'm sorry, Lady Susan. I fear that I was thinking of something else," he admitted with a sigh. "What were you saying?"

"I was enquiring as to whether you might see fit to join my father and me for dinner soon." Lady Susan scowled at him, as though she was not pleased to have been ignored.

"I am sure that if Lord Tompkins would like my company he shall ask me," Edwin responded, in the hope that it might put her off the idea.

"I am quite capable of inviting my own guests to dinner," Lady Susan said, and Edwin knew there was no other way around it.

“I would be honoured to join you and your father for dinner,” he nodded, and Lady Susan squeezed his arm with joy.

Chapter 9

The garden at Haddington Hall had become Helena's only refuge. It was there that she found herself pondering the letter she had received the night before from Lord Yarmouth's own hand.

Though he had told her that it had been delivered to her old home by mistake, she couldn't help but wish that she had received it sooner. The contents made her more nauseous every time that she looked at them, and yet she couldn't stop herself.

The sound of someone clearing their throat behind her was the only thing that stopped her. She jumped up from the marble bench she had been perched on and turned to find Lord Edwin gazing back at her.

His blue-brown eyes were alight with something foreign to her, and when he stepped forward to greet her, she found she was quite off balance.

"Miss Helena, I do hope that I am not disturbing you." He bowed low.

"I am quite happy for the disturbance, Lord Edwin," she responded with a curtsy, the letter still clasped in her hand.

"Are you quite well?" he asked, and when his eyes fell upon the letter she knew she could not bring herself to say the words aloud.

Instead, she handed him the paper and watched as his face began to drop.

"Your father has passed away?" He gasped in shock. "Oh, Miss Helena. I am most aggrieved for you!"

The pity in his tone was almost more than Helena could handle.

"I do not understand," Lord Edwin continued when she remained silent. "I had heard that your father was soon to be released from his debt and would return to you."

Helena closed her eyes for a moment and sucked in a deep breath before opening them again. "In the last letter I received from him he had expressed that he was quite content at Marshalsea and spoke of remaining there."

"Why on earth would he do such a thing?" Lord Edwin looked utterly shocked, as Helena had been when she had received the correspondence.

"I fear my father lost all sense of reason towards the end," Helena said. "Perhaps he was happier that way."

"For all his failings, your father was a good man," Lord Edwin assured her.

Helena nodded.

When she didn't speak he gestured towards the bench. "Might we sit for a while?"

"Of course." Helena nodded and glided over to sit upon the bench.

When he seated himself beside her, she breathed in the spicy scent of his cologne that had become ever more familiar over recent weeks.

"I know it is small consolation, Miss Helena. But one good thing has come with your father's death," Lord Edwin explained, and she was startled when he took hold of her hand.

"What could that possibly be, Lord Edwin?" she asked.

"Your father's debt died with him, leaving you free to do as you wish," he said, and Helena realised that he was right. She no longer had any obligation to remain with Lord Tompkins.

It was a small relief, for she had no idea where she might go. She had little to no money left from the sale of her mother's bracelet, and it certainly wasn't enough to live on.

"I have nowhere else to go," she sighed.

For all she wished to leave, she could think of ten reasons why she could not. She only hoped that Lord Tompkins would allow her to stay now that the debt was lifted.

"Perhaps you might come and stay with Lady Claire and me?" Lord Edwin's offer took her off-guard and she had no idea what to say.

She was even more shocked when Lord Edwin dropped down from the bench to kneel before her. "Miss Helena, you have quite taken me by surprise."

"How so?" She struggled to say the words, for she was utterly shocked beyond belief.

"I find you are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes upon. You are charming and kind and I cannot imagine what my life would be without you in it."

For a moment, Helena allowed Lord Edwin's words to wash over her. He was saying all the things she had dreamed he would say had he fallen in love with her. Yet whenever she looked in his eyes all she could see was pity. It wasn't until he reached into his breast pocket that she knew her fears had been confirmed. He was speaking to her out of pity and nothing more.

"This is no ring, but I feel it will bring you much more joy," Lord Edwin said, and Helena gasped when she recognised the emerald bracelet that had once been her mother's. "Miss Helena, would you take this as a token of my utmost affection? And would you do me the great honour of agreeing to be my wife?"

Helena was so taken aback that she could barely speak. She imagined how it would feel to be Lord Edwin's wife and her heart began to soar. Yet there was a small voice of doubt in her mind that would not simply allow her to say yes.

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath before looking down at him again. "Lord Edwin, I fear I cannot, for I know that you only seek to marry me out of pity."

"I am grievously upset that you would think it so," Lord Edwin sighed, although Helena had already turned her gaze away from him. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes and she couldn't bear to let him see.

"Please, stand up, Lord Edwin, before your knees get cut up by the shingles," Helena said, and she slipped off the bench, suddenly too close for comfort.

Lord Edwin hesitated for only a moment before he pushed himself to his feet and wiped the dust from the knees of his breeches.

"Miss Helena, might we still be friends at least?" Lord Edwin asked, and Helena was almost sure she could hear the fear in his voice. "I would be devastated if I was not able to see you. Please allow me to visit you again."

His tone was almost pleading and Helena could not bear the thought of never seeing him again.

"Of course we shall remain friends, Lord Edwin," she assured him, and she turned to place a tender kiss upon his cheek.

Lord Edwin held her close for only a moment before allowing her to take a step back.

"I wish you all the best, my dearest friend," Lord Edwin spoke as though through gritted teeth and all Helena could do was hope that she had not offended him too deeply.

It wasn't until Lord Edwin had retired that Miss Helena returned to the house. Upon entering she began to wish that she hadn't.

Lady Susan was skulking in the hallway, standing in the doorway of the drawing-room as though she had been waiting for her.

"Why, Miss Helena. Why do you look so disheartened?" Lady Susan asked with concern, though the smile on her face was less than worried.

"I believe I may have taken a little too much sun," Helena lied. There was no way she could confide in Lady Susan what had just happened. It would only make her more determined to put herself in front of Lord Edwin.

Although Helena could not have accepted the lord's proposal, she

couldn't bear the thought that he might turn his attention elsewhere. She hoped that she could put more faith into the fact that Lord Edwin did not seem to like Lady Susan, but she couldn't be sure.

"So it has nothing to do with the fact that Lord Edwin just left in quite a hurry?" Lady Susan sounded as though she was trying not to laugh, and Helena's patience for the woman started to grow all too thin.

"I do not know what you believe that you witnessed, but I can assure you that my mood has nothing to do with Lord Edwin," Helena assured the woman. However, the expression on Lady Susan's face told her that she wasn't entirely believed.

"I did warn you not to set your eyes above your station," Lady Susan crowed, as though she was quite pleased to have witnessed their parting.

Helena thought for a moment of telling her that she had declined Lord Edwin's proposal. It would only make things worse, so she kept her mouth closed on the subject.

"You are quite within your rights to believe what you want," Helena told her mistress.

"I do believe that there are many nobles who would feel the same way," Lady Susan assured her. "Lord Edwin is much too good for the likes of you and it appears he has realised so."

Helena closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath in exasperation. Oh, how she wished that she could put Lady Susan in her place. But

she knew that it would do no good. It would only make her situation in society worse than it already was.

“You would do well to remember, Miss Helena, that you are indebted to this family,” Lady Susan continued, as though she was not finished degrading Helena. “Any gossip that arises about you will reflect badly upon this household, and I cannot have that.”

“I do not wish for there to be any gossip about me,” Helena said honestly. In fact, she rather wished that everybody would stop talking about her. It had been a long time since her father had been incarcerated and yet it still seemed to be a very hot topic. “It is about time that the nobles found someone else to gossip about. My father’s downfall must be quite boring to talk about.”

“Miss Helena, if you believe that is the only gossip that has spread about you then you are quite mistaken,” Lady Susan tittered. “Many of the other ladies have noticed your determination to get close to Lord Edwin.”

Helena knew that wasn’t true, and if it was it was only because Lady Susan had been dripping poison into their ears.

“Lady Susan, have you finished scolding me?” Miss Helena asked. “It must be making you quite exhausted by now.”

Lady Susan did not look pleased by her comment, but she did not say another word.

“If you will excuse me, I will go upstairs to get ready for dinner,”

Helena added. And she made her way towards the stairs. “We do not want to keep your father waiting.”

Chapter 10

(One month later.)

Countess Pirelli was a gracious woman. She set up many an opportunity for Helena to sing during London season. The freedom she felt when she sang was a brief but welcome escape from her mundane existence among Lord Tompkins' household.

The crowd around her were silent as she sang, admiring her voice, although when she looked out over them she barely recognised a single face.

After the third song, the round of applause was like none Helena had ever experienced. It was almost deafening as it bounced off the hard marble floor of the London ballroom. Yet over the noise she heard the voice yelling, "That's her! She's wearing my lady's necklace!"

Fear gripped Helena as she realised that the woman was pointing right at her.

Instinctively her hand flew to the gold heart pendant she had received at her last event, given to her by one of the men who had admired her voice.

Lord Blackwood, the host of the party, urged his way through the crowd with the accusing lady following quickly behind him. She was a

weasel of a woman with a pinched nose and dark eyes that stared accusingly at Helena.

"Miss Helena, where did you get that necklace?" Lord Blackwood enquired. He gazed at the pendant around her neck as the small heart hovered just above the neckline of her pink floral dress.

"It was a gift from a gentleman who admired my singing," Helena said truthfully, for there was nothing else she could say.

"Liar!" the woman hissed. "She is a liar and a thief!"

Gasps of shock and outrage spread throughout the room and the eyes who had been admiring her now turned accusing.

"It was a gift, I swear it," Helena insisted. Her hands trembled and she hid them behind her skirts. If anyone noticed, they might see it as proof of her guilt.

She thought for a moment of the evening she had received the gift. It had been only politeness that made her accept it in the first place. Now she wished she hadn't.

"We must call the bailiff to get to the bottom of this," Lord Blackwood said, and his words made Helena's heart stop. She remembered the last time she had seen the bailiffs as they tore her house apart to pay for her father's debts.

"My lady would not lie! She is of the highest reputation and that is her necklace!" The disenchanting lady's companion insisted. There was a hiss to her tone that made Helena wince. What chance did she stand against the word of a high-born noble lady?

The moment the bailiffs arrived they would hear whatever story the woman had made up and see it as the truth. The thought of being carted off to Marshalsea as her father had been made Helena sick to her stomach.

Glancing around she saw that the doors behind her were open to the gardens beyond. In a fit of madness, she hitched up her skirts and ran for the doors, knowing that she would not make it through the crowd to the front door before somebody laid their hands on her.

"Stop her!" Lord Blackwood yelled, and the sound of pounding footsteps followed her.

Helena did not stop or look back. She prayed her feet would remain true to her as she hurried over the patio and around to the front of the house.

"Come back here!" a man yelled after her, but still she did not stop.

Her dress snagged on the rose bushes that were planted at the front of the house and when she tore away, threads off her skirt were left behind on the thorns. It was a small price to pay for her freedom as she hurried into the darkness of the street, keeping away from the lamplights that would give away her position.

The footsteps behind her slowly began to fade and when she was sure she had lost them, she turned down an alley between two buildings. The darkness enveloped her as she paused for a few moments to capture her breath.

Hot tears streamed down her face as she realised the awful position she found herself in. Gossip would soon spread of Miss Helena who had stolen a necklace from a high-born lady. Before long no place in London would be safe. But where could she go that might be?

She thought of Lord Edwin's home in Surrey, but he was probably not there. He and Lady Claire would be travelling at this time of year and she had no way of knowing where they might be.

It was then that Countess Pirelli popped into her head. Lady Isabelle had always been kind to her. She would know what to do.

Helena wandered the streets of London, keeping to the darkened alleys in the hope that the lawmen would not find her. No doubt news of her fleeing had spread far and wide by now. After her numerous singing events, there weren't many in London who would not recognise her and she knew it would not be safe to return to the noble house where Countess Pirelli had managed to get her placed for her time there.

She did not know Lord and Lady Hamilton very well, but she knew they would have no problem turning her over to the authorities if they found her returning to their home.

By the time dawn arrived, Helena found herself hidden in the alley between two London stores. She had settled herself upon some empty boxes in the hope of getting a little rest before she could enquire as to where she might get a lift to Shere and Lord Yarmouth's manor.

Hoping that the good lords and ladies would not yet be rising from their beds, she hurried out from the alley and headed in the direction of the main market, where several traders would be setting up their stalls for the day.

There were jewellery merchants, fishmongers, fresh fruit and vegetable stalls, and even a flower girl who passed through the crowd selling her posies just as the one in Shere did. The little girl's appearance made Helena smile for a moment before she remembered the danger she was in.

When she saw two police officers in their fine uniforms at the other end of the street, her heart began to hammer in her chest once again. She hurried to hide behind the closest stall, pretending that she was interested in the fruit and vegetables she found there as the policemen wandered idly by.

It didn't appear that they were looking for anyone in particular, but there was no way Helena was going to draw attention to herself by doing something stupid. Instead, she remained where she was.

"Is there something I can help you with, miss?" the man behind the stall asked, and she looked up as soon as she recognised the accent. It was similar to those she heard back in Shere.

"Forgive me, sir, but I fear I do not require your produce," Helena

replied politely before plucking up the courage to ask, "May I ask whether you shall be returning to Surrey in the coming days?"

The man, who was plainly dressed, looked at her with a shocked expression. "May I ask how you know I am from those parts, miss?"

"I have been told that I am quite perceptive when it comes to accents, sir," Helena admitted.

"Quite perceptive indeed," the man nodded. "I am to go back to Surrey this evening after I have sold all my produce."

Hope swelled inside Helena and she closed her eyes for a moment to send a prayer to God that he would be kind enough to accept her proposal.

"I need to go to Shere," she explained, opening her eyes again. "I have some urgent business I must attend to there and I was wondering whether you might be kind enough to give me a lift?"

"Has nobody ever told you that its dangerous to travel with strangers, miss?" he asked, and Helena wished she had the option to be wary of such danger. As it was, she felt that it was more dangerous to remain in London.

"I'm afraid that the matter I must address is far too important to worry over who I might be travelling with," she admitted. She watched the man's expression as it turned thoughtful.

“Am I to understand that you will be paying for my services?” the man enquired. Helena thought of the small amount of money she had left from the sale of her mother’s bracelet. She found herself clutching the item as she nodded.

“I will be sure to pay you handsomely for your services,” she assured him.

“Then I would be very happy to assist you, Miss...?”

“Miss Helena,” she told him.

“Please, call me Jack, for I am just a humble farmer,” he told her with a smile. “I will be leaving this evening as I said.”

“Perhaps I might be able to assist you in the running of your stall until then?” Helena offered. She needed something to pass the time and keep her mind off all that she was running from.

Hitching a lift on a farmer's cart was not entirely beyond Helena's means. She had earned herself a small sum of money since Countess Pirelli had started to get her events in every noble house in London. It was quite strange to travel through the night, however, and Helena found herself nodding off several times.

The farmer told her he would very much like to help a pretty lady, though she knew it was the coin she offered that really sweetened the deal.

"Might I ask why a sweet young lady such as yourself is travelling alone?" the farmer asked as she sat on the bench at the front of the cart with him.

"I have received news from home and fear I must get back quickly." Helena gave the first excuse that came to mind, and she was relieved when the farmer did not question her further.

He was a kindly man with a pot-belly and a whisky nose. Although he smelled of horsehair and dirt, his company was not entirely unpleasant. It was a small price to pay never to see the inside of the Marshalsea again.

The ride back to Surrey was much more unpleasant than the journey to London had been. The cart's seat was hard beneath her compared to the luxury of the carriage that had carried her to London. Every time they hit a hole in the road, a jolt of discomfort surged up her spine, and she clung onto the bench for dear life, dreadfully scared that she might be thrown off.

"We'll be there before too long, miss," the farmer assured her, as though he sensed her discomfort.

Helena was more than a little relieved when the town appeared before her. The chatter and bustle of the streets of Shere calmed Helena's shattered nerves. When the cart finally stopped in the market, she was quick to clamber down from the bench and offer the farmer the last of the payment she had promised him.

"I do hope that all is well for you, miss," the farmer said as he pocketed the money.

"I wish you well also, mister," Helena replied, and gave him a brief smile before she made her way from the market.

With every noble person she passed she feared that news might have already spread from London. No doubt at least half of the gentlemen and ladies would recognise her if it had.

Relief overwhelmed her when Lord Yarmouth's house came into view at the end of the road. It was lit up like a fairytale house in the late morning sun. Hurrying to the door, she pounded her fist on the wood a little harder than a lady ought to.

When the door was opened by a servant she panted quickly. "I must speak with Countess Pirelli on an urgent matter."

The maid scowled, and Helena wondered what she could have possibly said wrong.

"Miss, I'm afraid that Countess Pirelli is not here." The maid shook her head.

"When might she be back?" Helena asked, hopeful that it would be soon.

"I'm afraid she won't be, Miss," the maid said, and for a moment Helena was confused.

"May I enquire as to what you mean?" Helena asked. She needed to find Countess Pirelli. The countess might be her only haven.

"The countess and Lady Winifred came to some kind of disagreement over a horse," the maid explained, and Helena couldn't help but think that it sounded just like something Lady Winifred would be involved in, although she couldn't imagine Countess Pirelli in the same situation.

"Might you have the address of where the countess went?" Helena asked, praying that the maid wouldn't tell her she was on her way back to Italy or something silly. There was no way Helena could hope to follow her there.

"I believe that the countess went to stay with the Makepeace family," the maid said, and Helena was more relieved than ever.

The Makepeace estate was a way away, but it was not Italy. Helena thanked God for small mercies.

The journey from Lord Yarmouth's house to Sir Joshua's estate was a long one, but there was no way around it. The sooner that Helena found herself in Countess Pirelli's company the safer she would feel.

She headed away from Lord Yarmouth's house, wondering how she might be able to travel there when she found herself stopped by a pair of delivery men who were blocking her path. They carried a pile of packages from the front of the grocery store to a cart waiting in the street and Helena was forced to pause and wait for them to get out of her path.

"Miss Helena?" It was the shopkeeper's wife who spoke to her from the doorway of the grocery store.

Over the last few months, Helena had become quite acquainted with the older lady whenever Lady Susan sent her into town to gather supplies. It was a job usually reserved for the servants of the household, but Lady Susan appeared to believe that Helena was one of them.

She was all too happy to oblige the request, knowing that it would offer her a little time away from Haddington Hall and the cruel mistress who resided there.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Flowers," Helena greeted her with a smile, although it was a struggle to do so for she was so tired.

"Are you well, Miss Helena?" Mrs Flowers asked. Her eyebrow raised in a slight look of concern, as though she was looking straight through Helena and right into her soul.

"I am, Mrs Flowers," Helena said in as strong a tone as she could muster. "I am visiting from London and I fear that my mistress's

servant has wandered off. I was supposed to be meeting her at Sir Joshua Makepeace's estate."

Helen hated to lie to the woman, but what else could she do? She could not very well tell her the real reason she was back on the streets of Shere.

"Well, what a coincidence," Mrs Flowers smiled brightly. "My boys were just headed up there with the weekly delivery."

It was then that the two men who had been packing the cart came to stand before her and she realised how similar they looked to Mrs Flowers. With the same ashy blond hair and muddy brown eyes, they could have only been her sons. Helena had never put two and two together before now, but it was clear to see as she found herself faced with the three of them.

"Thomas, Edward, perhaps you might be kind enough to offer Miss Helena a lift to Sir Joshua's estate?" Mrs Flowers suggested kindly, and Helena knew that she would owe the kind shopkeeper's wife for the rest of her life.

"Of course, Mother." It was Thomas, the older of the two brothers, who spoke first. "We would be happy to."

He gave Helena a smile that was as kind as his mother's.

"Well, then you had better fetch the rest of the delivery and hurry up about it," Mrs Flowers insisted. "We do not want to keep Miss Helena waiting in this heat."

Mrs Flowers was right. The afternoon had become very warm indeed. The sun was beating down on the street, causing heatwaves to rise from the cobblestones.

“Miss Helena, why don’t you come inside for a cup of tea while you wait?” Mrs Flowers offered.

For a moment Helena thought of refusing her request. She was most eager to be on her way. Then she realised how dry her throat was and she knew that if she didn’t get a drink soon she might be taken ill.

That was the last thing she needed on top of everything else.

“That is very kind of you, Mrs Flowers. Thank you.”

Helena followed the shopkeeper’s wife into the grocery store and through to the back storeroom where a small table was placed in the centre, surrounded by all the supplies that kept the store running.

“I’m afraid that this tea isn’t what you are used to but it will quench your thirst as good as any,” Mrs Flowers told her as she poured a cup of tea from a still steaming hot teapot and placed it on the table in front of Helena.

“Thank you, Mrs Flowers,” she said again. And when she lifted the teacup to her lips the scent of honey and lemons filled her nostrils.

“Is everything all right, Miss Helena?” Mrs Flowers asked as she took the seat opposite her and took a sip from her own teacup. “You seem unlike yourself this afternoon.”

“I am tired after my journey from London,” she admitted. It was the truth. Her eyelids were heavy and she had seen far too much sun for one day.

“I do believe that your face has caught the sun on your way up,” Mrs Flowers pointed out, and Helena knew that she was right. Her skin had become sore with exposure to the sun and she could only hope it didn’t look as bad as it felt.

“I was in such a rush to leave London that I forgot to bring my sunhat with me,” Helena admitted with a sigh. She wished that was the only reason she had left all her worldly belongings back in London.

“Perhaps you might borrow one of mine?” Mrs Flowers suggested.

“That is very kind of you, but I couldn’t possibly,” Helena protested.

“Of course you can,” Mrs Flowers insisted. “And if you are worried about getting it back to me, you can give it to Thomas or Edward to bring back when they have delivered you safely to Sir Joshua.”

Realising that Mrs Flowers wasn’t a woman who backed down Helena nodded. “That is very generous of you, Mrs Flowers. Thank you.”

Chapter 11

When news of the scandal reached Lord Edwin's ear, he knew he must see Miss Helena immediately. Having little idea of where he might find her, he travelled to Haddington Hall. The moment he climbed down from his horse, Lady Susan appeared in the manor house porch.

She smiled and waved her white handkerchief at him as he hurried up the steps to join her.

"Lady Susan, is Miss Helena at home?" he asked politely.

Lady Susan's face turned sour immediately. "Hadn't you heard? The little scoundrel is on the run."

Edwin's heart clenched and he sighed as he shook his head. "So she is not here?"

"There is no place for thieves and liars beneath this roof," Lady Susan said.

"I shall go to Lord Yarmouth's," Edwin thought out loud. "Perhaps she has sought sanctuary there."

Lady Susan reached out to grip his forearm. "Dear Lord Edwin, you

must be tired after riding so far. At least take tea in the drawing-room with me before you hurry off again."

Edwin could not bear the thought of spending another moment in Lady Susan's company, but he had to admit he was terribly parched.

He allowed the lady to lead him through the house to the drawing-room where a pot of tea was already waiting, almost as though she had been expecting him.

Edwin sat for a moment and sipped his tea as he thought carefully on how he should proceed.

"Lady Susan, do you know of any truth to the accusations against Miss Helena?" he asked.

"Of course, Lord Edwin. She has always been a light-fingered woman," Lady Susan said, though there was laughter in her voice. "I often found my jewels missing when she was around."

A dark suspicion entered Edwin's mind, for he knew that what she said of Miss Helena couldn't possibly be true.

"Lady Susan, forgive me for asking, but did you have something to do with this?" he asked as politely as he could muster. His patience for Lady Susan was rapidly growing thin.

"Lord Edwin, how could you possibly think such a thing?" Lady Susan

gasped, although there was malicious intent behind her words that told Edwin she'd had all too much to do with it.

"The truth now, Lady Susan," he insisted. "I must have the truth."

"Why does it matter to you?" Lady Susan demanded angrily. "Miss Helena is nothing to you."

She is everything to me, Edwin thought sadly as he remembered the day in the garden when Helena had refused his marriage proposal. He knew why she had refused him, though he couldn't help but wish she hadn't.

"It matters to me if she has been falsely accused." Edwin glowered at Lady Susan, determined to have the truth of the matter.

"I may have given Captain Bigsby a necklace of mine in the hope that he might bestow it upon Miss Helena." Lady Susan's smile was sickening, and not for the first time Edwin wished he was the kind of man who might strike a woman.

His hand gripped his teacup so hard he feared he might break it if he did not set it down.

"Lady Susan, did you orchestrate this entire thing?" Edwin demanded as he pushed himself to his feet. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Miss Helena was reaching well above her station," Lady Susan sighed

and sipped at her tea as though she was merely talking of the latest gossip. "Somebody had to do something to bring her back down to earth."

"Lady Susan, if I didn't know any better I might say you were jealous of Miss Helena." Edwin struggled not to smile at the terrible reaction on the lady's face.

"How dare you?" she demanded. "I could never be jealous of such a woman."

Her reaction told Edwin all he needed to know.

"You just couldn't bear to see me happy with someone else, could you?" Edwin snarled. "As if anyone could ever be happy with a woman such as yourself."

Lady Susan stood then and glared back at him. "Your happiness is of no consequence to me, my lord."

Edwin didn't believe her. She had obviously sensed the connection between him and Miss Helena, and she couldn't stand it.

"Miss Helena has no right to marry above her station, just as her father had no right to that ridiculous title!" Lady Susan insisted. "The little worm needed to be taught a lesson."

Edwin stepped forwards and gripped hold of Lady Susan by the

forearms. It was not the done thing, yet he could not stop himself.

"You listen and listen well, Lady Susan. You will cease this vendetta against Miss Helena immediately or I shall take what I know to every single noble house in England and you shall be cast from society," he threatened, and her face grew as pale as her white lace gloves.

The door behind Edwin swung open and Lord Tompkins appeared. Edwin released Lady Susan, fearful that he might defend his daughter.

"Father, did you see the way that he manhandled me?" Lady Susan gasped as she stepped away, rubbing her forearms as though Edwin had hurt her.

"Be quiet, daughter, or I shall manhandle you myself," Lord Tompkins snapped at her before turning to Edwin. "Forgive my daughter, my lord, for I fear the blame for this may lie at my feet."

Edwin was taken off-guard. "Why do you say that?" Edwin asked.

"I admit that I have spoken unkindly towards Miss Helena and her father on many occasions," Lord Tompkins sighed. "It appears that it has rubbed off on my daughter."

He turned an angry glare on Lady Susan as though he was disgusted with her actions.

When he turned his attention back to Edwin, the anger was gone,

replaced by sadness. "You may tell Miss Helena, when you see her, that her obligations at Haddington Hall are finished."

"But Father!" Lady Susan protested, but her father raised his hand to cut her off.

"Enough, I will not allow you to torment the girl any further," he declared before adding, "Lady Susan I am disgusted with the hatred I have instilled in you. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Edwin didn't miss the way Lady Susan's cheeks began to blush. He could only hope that her father's words might take her down a peg or two.

Upon his return home, Lord Edwin found his cousin, Lady Claire, in the drawing-room. She was engrossed in a letter that was cupped in her hands as though it was made of gold.

"Lord Edwin!" Lady Claire exclaimed as she started to rise from the couch.

"Do not get up, cousin," Edwin insisted with a wave of his hand, and he took himself to an armchair opposite her.

"Is something the matter?" Lady Claire asked, discarding her letter on the couch beside her. She straightened up in order to look at him

directly.

Edwin shook his head and pressed his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. He'd had a headache from the moment he had left Lord Tompkins estate and it was growing worse by the minute.

The thought of what Miss Helena must be going through made him feel nauseous. The knowledge that she had fled London worried him further still. She might have been anywhere in the country by now, and he may never find her.

"Dear cousin Edwin, whatever is the matter?" Lady Claire asked, and she leaned forwards on the couch as though she was even more interested in what was troubling him.

"I have concerns about Miss Helena," Edwin admitted. Lady Claire had become one of the few relatives he found he could confide his secrets to over the years.

"Miss Helena? Has something happened in London?" Lady Claire enquired.

"I have had news of a scandal of theft connecting itself to Miss Helena," Edwin admitted. "Though I know the truth of it, I fear that others might not be so easily persuaded of her innocence."

"That is awful news!" Lady Claire gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth as though someone had died. "Is there anything I can do?"

Edwin shook his head for he wasn't even sure what he could do until Miss Helena was found. Her fleeing London had only made her look more guilty in the eyes of the nobles.

"I have come into some information that Lady Susan is to blame for all of this," Edwin continued, and Lady Claire gasped again.

"Lady Susan has always been a conniving woman, but I never thought she could be capable of such a scheme," Lady Claire admitted in disbelief.

"I have just come from Lord Tompkins' home," Edwin explained to her further. "Lady Susan all but admitted her guilt."

"What are you going to do with such information?" Lady Claire asked. "Will you take it to the authorities?"

"I may need to if Miss Helena finds herself incarcerated," Edwin sighed. He couldn't bear the thought of her being locked away in Marshalsea, as her father had been. It was bad enough to see the sorrow on her face when she had visited the poor man.

A stay in the prison for her own suspected crimes might be the end of her.

He thought for several moments upon the circumstances of Miss Helena's father's passing and he couldn't bear the thought that she might end up the same way if he was unable to unravel the scandal that surrounded her.

“You feel very deeply for Miss Helena, don’t you?” Lady Claire asked, and her question caused him to look up at her with surprise. Was it so obvious?

“She is different from any other woman that I have ever met,” he told her in all honesty, although he wasn’t sure how much more detail he should go into. He had never told his cousin of the proposal he had made to Miss Helena for fear it might get back to the other nobles. The last thing he wanted was for Miss Helena to be the source of yet more gossip, especially at his hand.

“Do you believe she might be to you what I am to Sir Joshua Makepeace?” Lady Claire asked, and Edwin realised it must have been all too obvious.

“I do,” he admitted. “Though I believe that it doesn’t matter.”

“What on earth could lead you to believe that?” Lady Claire’s tone was shocked now. “Any woman would be lucky to have you. Especially Miss Helena. She is a fine woman though I fear the scandals surrounding her make things slightly more difficult.”

Lady Claire was right. Miss Helena was a fine woman indeed.

Edwin knew that it was time to come clean to his cousin. He didn’t know that it would help matters much, but at least he might be able to talk to someone about the matter.

“Before Miss Helena went to London, I visited her at Haddington Hall,” he said. “I was overcome with my feelings for her and I proposed to her.”

Lady Claire’s delighted smile spread across her face and she exclaimed, “That is wonderful news, cousin Edwin.”

When he lowered his gaze from hers and kept it there, she seemed to pick up on his awkwardness.

“She did say yes, didn’t she?” Lady Claire asked, her tone unsure. Edwin knew that the answer was written all over his face.

“I’m afraid she thought I proposed to her out of pity,” he told his cousin. “I have never been very good at expressing my feelings, and she did not see that I meant to marry her out of love for her.”

“Well, Miss Helena is definitely not a thief, but it appears that she is a fool.” Lady Claire sighed and shook her head. “You must find her and tell her how you feel before it is too late.”

Edwin only wished it were that simple. He would have given anything in the world to tell Miss Helena how he truly felt, and yet he had no idea where to begin looking for her.

There was a gentle knocking at the door and they looked around to see his maid enter the room.

“Mrs Jenkins, is everything all right?” Edwin asked the woman who had worked for both him and his father before him. She was getting on in years, but she never once lowered her satisfactory work.

“A letter has arrived for the Lady Claire, my lord.” Mrs Jenkins explained and Lady Claire hurried to her feet to take it from her.

Edwin watched only mildly interested in what the letter might say before Lady Claire gasped and turned to look at him with a bright smile on her face. “It’s a letter from Sir Joshua Makepeace.”

Edwin struggled not to roll his eyes. The last thing he needed to hear about right now was another love letter from his friend to his cousin. Though he was pleased for the couple, he could not help but envy them their easy ride to the altar.

“That’s lovely,” he said with a sigh.

“Cousin Edwin, I am not sure that you understand me.” Lady Claire crossed the room and shoved the letter into his hands. “Sir Joshua has written to tell me that Miss Helena has arrived at his estate. She is found, cousin!”

Edwin read for himself the words that Sir Joshua had written of Miss Helena’s arrival at his home on the back of a delivery wagon from Shere, and his heart almost exploded with relief.

Chapter 12

The next morning after a rough night of travelling by cart and on foot, stopping and starting, Helena had finally knocked on the door of the Makepeace house.

She held her breath as she waited anxiously for it to be answered. A thought quickly crossed her mind that perhaps she might have missed the countess again.

When the maid finally answered, she was much more welcoming than Lord Yarmouth's servant. A bright smile spread across her face as she asked, "May I help you, miss?"

"I believe that Countess Pirelli is a guest here?" Helena asked before she quickly added, "Might it be possible for me to speak with her?"

"Do come in, miss," the maid said, and Helena finally allowed herself to breathe as the door was closed behind her.

"Please, have a seat in the drawing-room and I shall fetch the countess from the garden."

Helena thanked her and made her way to the drawing-room, where she sat beside the empty fireplace and attempted to settle her nerves.

"Miss Helena? What on earth are you doing in Surrey?" Countess Pirelli asked as soon as she arrived. "Are you well?" The Italian lady examined Helena closely, as though she feared something was dreadfully wrong.

"Oh, Lady Isabelle, I am so sorry for disturbing you but I had no idea where else to go." Helena's voice broke as tears began to stream down her face.

"Oh, my dear, whatever is the matter?" Lady Isabelle asked as she came to sit upon the couch beside Helena.

The way she took Helena's hand was of little comfort.

"Something dreadful has happened," Helena wept. "I was at one of the events you planned for me when a lady accused me of stealing her necklace."

Lady Isabelle looked entirely shocked even as Helena gestured to the pendant around her neck.

"But you received that from Captain Bigsby," Lady Isabelle protested. "I was there. I quite remember you smiling when you received it."

"I tried to tell them that, but they would not listen." Helena gasped against the sobs that were wracking her body. "They threatened to call the bailiff and I knew they would cart me off to Marshalsea, just as they did my father."

"Oh, Miss Helena, do calm yourself," Lady Isabelle said, as she squeezed Helena's hand. "I fear I must tell you something that is little known."

Helena took the handkerchief that Lady Isabelle offered and wiped away her tears as she waited for the lady to speak again.

"You were told that I arrived here in England due to being displaced by the war, but that is not entirely true," Lady Isabelle said in a hushed tone, as though she was fearful she might be overheard. "I find myself in a similar situation to your father. You see, while in Italy I was very careless with my late husband's fortune and before long I found myself penniless."

Helena gasped. She could never have imagined that the woman would be keeping such a secret.

"But you wear the finest jewels and dresses," Helena exclaimed. "How can you be penniless?"

"My dear, a woman's charms can take her quite far in the world." Lady Isabelle smiled sadly. "After my husband's death, I had a great many suitors all too willing to offer their jewels and gifts to keep me in luxury."

"But you never married again?" Helena questioned.

"I have no need to." Lady Isabelle shook her head. "After my only

marriage, I told myself I would never settle for anything less than love. And so far I have not found it."

Helena was speechless. She only wished that she had the choice of marrying for love and nothing else.

"So you see, without a husband to tie me down, I can travel the world wherever I may please."

"But how did you avoid debtors' prison?" Helena asked. "They must have them, even in Italy."

"Yes, they do have them in Italy," Lady Isabelle mused. "Due to my station, I was able to avoid debtors' prison by staying with friends until I had been gifted enough to travel here to England."

"What must I do, Lady Isabelle?" Helena asked, fearful of what her answer might be. "They will never listen to me against the world of a high-born lady. I have no title to protect me as you did."

Lady Isabelle looked thoughtful for a few moments before she replied. "Have you ever thought of travelling to Europe?"

There was a playful glaze in Lady Isabelle's eyes that told Helena she was forming the most delightful plan in her head.

"You mean for me to travel with you?" Helena asked, and when the countess shook her head, she felt the colour drain from her face.

"I am afraid I could not travel with an accused thief, my dear," Lady Isabelle sighed.

"But you believe me, don't you? I didn't steal anything," Helena pleaded, fearing that Lady Isabelle might not have believed her after all.

"Of course I believe you, Miss Helena. But be that as it may, it would arouse too much gossip and my reputation is already on the rocks."

"Then what am I to do?" Helena struggled to stop herself from squealing the words.

Lady Isabelle stood and wandered over to the service cord. Helena stiffened as she wondered why she could possibly be wanting the attention of a servant.

"Yes, Countess Pirelli?" A maid appeared almost immediately, the same one who had answered the door.

Helena held her breath as she waited for Lady Isabelle to answer.

"Might you ask Sir Joshua to join us, please?" the countess asked the maid, and the woman hurried off to fetch her master.

Lady Isabelle returned to her seat beside Helena and clutched her hand. "Do not fear, my dear. Everything will be well."

After a few minutes, the door clicked open and Sir Joshua stepped into view.

"Countess Pirelli? You wished to see me?" he asked with a low bow.

When he straightened up his eyes became wide with astonishment. "Miss Helena, I had not realised that you were here. I thought you were in London."

His gaze flitted between the two women before landing upon Helena again.

"I...I..." Helena stammered, as she had no idea how to explain herself.

"She was in London until yesterday. She was missing Surrey so terribly that she decided to come home early," Countess Pirelli explained. "Might she dine with us and stay the night? I would hate for her to have to travel twice in one day."

"Of course you must, Miss Helena!" Sir Joshua insisted. "We would be very pleased to have you at our table."

He examined her more closely then and when Helena glanced down she saw that her skirt, which had been torn by the rose bush thorns, was now caked in mud.

"Will you be wanting to change?" Sir Joshua asked with a raised eyebrow. Though he was polite in his asking, it was implied that she must change.

"I am afraid I came quite unprepared for dinner," Helena sighed. "Perhaps I should take supper in a guest room instead?"

"Nonsense, you shall borrow one of my dresses," Countess Pirelli said, and Helena was instantly washed with relief.

Although she had no idea where she would be heading the following morning, she could at least rest easy knowing that she was with friends and had a bed to sleep in for the night.

Chapter 13

The next morning, Helena sat alone in the drawing-room with no idea where she could possibly go. So far, nobody had made mention of her leaving, but she knew it was only a matter of time before Sir Joshua's hospitality ran out.

After her conversation with Lady Pirelli, she knew she would be of little help in the matter.

She was just beginning to succumb to sadness again when there was a quiet knocking at the door.

"Come in," she called, and the maid stepped inside with a low curtsy.

"Miss Helena, there is a Lady Claire Littleton here, seeking an audience," the maid said, and Helena was taken aback.

"Please show her in," Helena said, and as the maid disappeared she picked herself up from the couch to smooth down her borrowed dress.

It was a finer dress than she was used to, with purple and silver damask material and fine lace around the neck and cuffs. A far sight better than the one she had ruined during her journey from London.

She assured herself that the creases were gone from her skirt and looked up to find Lady Claire entering the room.

"Oh, Miss Helena, I am so happy to see you." Lady Claire practically flew across the room, gliding as though she walked on air, and wrapped her arms around her in a tight embrace.

Taken off-guard, Helena could do nothing more than hug her back.

"When I heard that you were here, I had to come and see you immediately," Lady Claire said as she pulled back to look down at Helena. "Are you well?"

"As well as can be," Helena replied, knowing that the lady would take it to mean that she was indeed well. Yet in her mind, she felt far from it.

"Oh, Miss Helena, I must request your help with something of utmost importance," Lady Claire explained as she pulled Helena down onto the couch to sit beside her.

"What is it?" Helena asked, quite concerned at her friend's tone.

"I fear I must ask you to write for me again," Lady Claire insisted.

"Lady Claire, I am afraid I do not feel right to do so." Helena shook her head and clasped her hands in front of her on her lap. "I felt quite deceitful doing it before."

Now that she was already in deep trouble with the law, she couldn't help but feel as though she might be pushing her luck.

"There shall be no deceit," Lady Claire said. "I only wish to write what I ask you to."

Helena was relieved at the prospect. If she was to write in Claire's own words, it couldn't be nearly as deceitful.

"Then I suppose I am obliged to help." Helena smiled, although she could not for the life of her understand why Lady Claire wished her to write a letter when the only person she had ever written letters to on her behalf was already in the house somewhere close by.

Instead of questioning it, Helena stood and wandered over to the desk on the far side of the room.

She set herself down on the chair, removed a piece of paper from a small pile and dipped the quill in the ink pot.

"I am ready whenever you would like to start," she told her friend.

Lady Claire smiled devilishly then and began to recite the words she wished for Helena to write. "My dearest love, I am quite fearful. You see I am afraid that I may have lost a love with whom I am very fond. I am writing to you this day to request your permission to come and see you as I wish for my feelings to be made known. I was quite silly

to refuse your request when last we met and I have thought about it at length for some time now."

Helena paused on the last sentence and looked up from the page.

What she was writing made no sense to her. The last thing she had heard from Lady Claire before leaving for London was that she and Sir Joshua were engaged. How could the lady have possibly lost her love?

"Why are you looking at me in such a manner, Miss Helena?" Lady Claire asked and there was obvious amusement in her eyes.

"I fear I am confused, Lady Claire," Helena admitted shyly, and her cheeks began to blush. "Why would you wish to send this kind of letter to Sir Joshua? Has something happened between the two of you?"

"Oh, my dear," Lady Claire stood up then and crossed the room to stand beside Helena. "This letter is not for my dear Joshua."

"Then who might it be for?" Helena enquired. Now she was even more confused than before. Who else could possibly be Lady Claire's dearest love?

"This letter is for Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins," Lady Claire explained and for a moment Helena feared that the lady may have lost her wits entirely.

She had no idea how to process this, and so she simply remained looking up at Lady Claire.

"You must sign the letter in your own hand, Miss Helena." Lady Claire said into the silence between them. "I shall deliver the letter to him for you myself."

"I don't understand." Helena lowered her gaze and shook her head. Her mind was spinning with the confusion.

"Miss Helena, are you in love with my cousin?" Lady Claire asked and Helena was still none the wiser to her friend's plan.

She thought of lying to her but decided that it was far from what the lady deserved.

"I do believe that I am," Helena admitted and now her cheeks were ruby red. She could feel the blush beginning to travel down her throat and onto her chest.

"Then why have you not told him so?" Lady Claire demanded and when Helena looked up she was scowling down at her with her hands placed upon her hips.

"It would do no good," Helena shook her head. "Your cousin is far too good for the likes of me. I am far beneath him."

"Do you not believe that a man has the choice of who he shall take to

be his bride?" Lady Claire asked.

"Of course. It is always the man to make the final decision, I suppose," Helena admitted.

"Then you must allow my cousin to know his own mind in this matter," Lady Claire pointed out. "For he has made it quite clear to me where he sits."

Helena felt her heart skip a beat at the lady's meaning.

"But he is well above my station." Helena protested.

"And yet I believe that you are perfect for my dear cousin," Lady Claire said with a perfect smile. "I am very rarely wrong about these things."

Helena was truly astonished by the words. Though she had always seen Lady Claire as a friend she had never once believed that the lady might think so highly of her. As she thought with Lord Edwin, she believed that Lady Claire was only kind to her out of pity.

This new revelation caused her to realise that it might not be so after all.

"If you truly love him you will sign the letter and we shall be done with all this nonsense of you not being good enough," Lady Claire determined.

Just then the sound of knocking came again and both Helena and Lady Claire jumped in fright.

Chapter 14

Edwin entered the drawing-room upon the admittance of Sir Joshua's maid to find both Miss Helena and Lady Claire stood before the desk.

There was a sheepish look upon their faces, which told him they had been discussing some kind of plan, though he could not for the life of him make out what it was.

"Cousin Claire," Edwin bowed his head to the lady before addressing the other, "Miss Helena."

"Cousin Edwin, might I ask what brings you here?" Lady Claire asked.

"I might ask you the same question," Edwin responded with a raised eyebrow and the two women seemed to gulp as though they were fearful of being found out.

"I came to enquire as to Miss Helena's health and see why she had returned from London so soon," Lady Claire explained.

"Then it appears we have arrived for the same reason," Edwin said and he turned to Miss Helena expectantly.

"I was quite homesick in London," Miss Helena explained.

Just then Edwin noticed the way that Miss Helena was holding her hands behind her back as though she had something hidden behind her skirt.

"Miss Helena, may I see your hands?" he asked, stepping forwards.

"My hands, Lord Edwin?" she asked, looking both fearful and concerned.

"Yes, Miss Helena, your hands." He nodded.

When she pulled her hands from behind her back he found them quite empty yet covered in black blotches.

A glance over her shoulder showed him the letter that was drying upon the desk behind them.

"Were you writing a letter?" Edwin enquired. He glanced at his cousin for he knew the truth behind their secret meetings at his home although he had never seen reason to press them upon it. "Might this letter be one from my cousin to my friend Sir Joshua?"

Both Miss Helena and Lady Claire's mouths practically fell open in astonishment and the two ladies quickly glanced at each other. Edwin struggled to hide his amusement at their discomfort.

"I must say, Miss Helena, I am quite disappointed that you would be so deceitful."

"Do not blame her, cousin," Lady Claire insisted. "I have never been any good with words and Miss Helena has been quite helpful to me."

"I cannot for the life of me understand why you would wish to help my cousin in being so dishonest." Edwin sighed and gazed down at Helena. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips trembled as though she might burst into tears, yet she was the most beautiful creature.

"I cannot say that it was deceitful, Lord Edwin," Miss Helena said defensively. "I only wrote what I believe to be in Lady Claire's heart."

"And how would you know what might be in my cousin's heart?" Edwin asked. His tone was harsh though he hadn't meant it to be.

"I believe I know a little something about love," Miss Helena admitted and he was about to speak again when she reached around for the letter on the table, "I had been halfway through writing this when you arrived."

She handed the still wet letter to Edwin and he gave it a cursory glance before he began to realise that the words were nothing like that which she had written to Sir Joshua.

"And this was to be sent to Sir Joshua?" He asked.

"No, my silly cousin, it was meant for you. Had you allowed Miss Helena to finish you would have seen her signature at the bottom."

"My writing those letters to Sir Joshua on Lady Claire's behalf were not meant to trick or trap him," Miss Helena insisted as he read over the letter again and again. "I simply felt I knew what was in Lady Claire's heart and she believed that I might be able to put it to paper much more easily than she."

"And what, Miss Helena, do you see of my heart?" Edwin asked, raising his gaze from the page.

"I am afraid I do not know what you mean." Miss Helena's face became flustered.

"I fear that you see my heart all too well for this is a similar letter to the one I have thought of writing you many times," Edwin admitted. "I am loathe to admit that I regret our last encounter and I had hoped that I might be able to persuade you in another direction, although I feared my words would fall upon deaf ears."

Miss Helena remained silent and now there were tears in her eyes.

"Miss Helena, do you feel the things that you wrote in this letter?" Edwin asked. He found himself praying that it was so. "Is there hope for me to find a place in your heart yet?"

"I fear that you may have already found it." Miss Helena's lip quivered as she spoke and Edwin's heart almost burst with joy.

He was about to go to her when the door behind him was suddenly flung open and Countess Pirelli dashed into the room.

"Miss Helena I must speak with you!" The heavy Italian accent to her voice caused her to sound entirely serious in her excitement. "Forgive me Lord Edwin, Lady Claire, but this is of the utmost importance."

"Well then, go ahead," Lady Claire said before Edwin had the slightest chance to object.

It appeared that his moment had been stolen and so instead he silently stepped back.

"Miss Helena, I have received word from a cousin in Italy who has heard from me and several other nobles of your beautiful voice," Countess Isabelle explained. "He and his wife wish for you to make the journey to Italy to sing for them at several balls and dinners among the Italian nobles."

Miss Helena's eyes lit up with opportunity at that moment and Edwin suddenly feared that he might lose her forever.

"Please would you excuse me?" Miss Helena asked in the politest of voices, though there was a mixture of expressions on her face that told Edwin her views on Countess Pirelli's revelation were conflicting.

She hurried from the room before anyone had the chance to stop her.

It was Lady Claire who spoke up quickly. "You must go to her, cousin Edwin."

When he looked at his cousin he saw the meaning in her eyes. She wished for him to follow through with the conversation they'd had in his drawing-room. The thought of it both exhilarated and scared him, but he knew that it was something he would never forgive himself for if he did not go through with it.

Chapter 15

Upon Countess Pirelli's announcement, Helena felt the need to take some time to be alone.

She made her way into the garden of Sir Joshua's estate. The smell of the flowers calmed her shattered nerves as she walked around and around the figure of eight comprised of several flower beds with a large fountain in the centre.

Her mind went over and over all that had been said. Not only had Countess Pirelli offered the chance of a lifetime that would see her free of the grasp of the English lawmen, but Lord Edwin had all but professed his love for her just as he had in the gardens at Haddington Hall.

She found herself looking down at the bracelet she had hardly taken off since that day. The emeralds glistened in the late afternoon sun as she walked and she couldn't help but smile at all they meant to her. Not only had the bracelet been her mother's, but Lord Edwin had brought it back to her in an act of such kindness it made her heart ache whenever she thought about it.

She had just reached the fountain for the fourth time on her route when the sound of footsteps came across the pebbled path behind her. When she looked over her shoulder, she found Lord Edwin making his way down the path in her direction.

For a moment she thought that she might slip behind the bushes to

hide from him, but instead, she remained stock still.

His gaze lifted from the floor to capture her in its grasp and she knew that even if she wanted to run she couldn't.

Lord Edwin's blue-brown gaze held her in place as he joined her beside the fountain.

"Miss Helena, I do not wish to disturb your peace, but I feel there are things between us that need to be voiced," he told her in the politest of tones.

"I fear you may be right." Helena nodded her agreement.

"Might we sit?" Lord Edwin gestured to the ledge seat on the edge of the fountain and Helena allowed him to guide her there.

He held on to her hand with a firm grip as though he was fearful that she might disappear if he let go.

"Miss Helena, I believe that I did not do my feelings justice when last we spoke in Haddington Hall's garden," Lord Edwin explained, "I should have been more precise in matters of the heart so not to confuse you."

Helena remained silent. She didn't wish to make him uncomfortable for worry that he might decide against speaking.

"Miss Helena, over the last few months I have come to see you as a beautiful, honourable and honest woman," Lord Edwin said and she could no longer hold her tongue.

"But I wrote those deceitful letters," she pointed out.

"I confess to you now that I had always known deep down that they were from you." Lord Edwin smiled. "My cousin, Lady Claire, is many things, but a poet is not one of them."

"So you are not angry with me for it?" Helena asked, holding her breath for his answer.

"Miss Helena, I could never be angry with you," he assured her as he stroked a stray strand of hair from her face. The tips of his fingers brushed her cheek as he did so and they sent a quiver throughout her entire body. "I know that in your heart you only ever do things for good reason."

The heart he spoke of suddenly took a great leap.

"I also know that in my heart you are the only object of my affections." Lord Edwin dropped his gaze then as he added, "Miss Helena, I feel that I am most in love with you and if you should still wish not to marry I will never be happy."

Helena was shocked at his revelation, so much so that she could not find her words.

When he looked at her again there was fear in his eyes. "If you reject me again you shall be condemning me to a life of sadness and loneliness, for I shall forever remain a bachelor."

"Lord Edwin, you cannot mean that," Helena protested.

"I speak the truth for I could never marry a woman for whom I had no love," Lord Edwin insisted. "And in all my life I have only ever loved you, Miss Helena."

Tears pricked in Helena's eyes then and she sucked in a deep breath in order to not let them fall.

"Lord Edwin, I fear that even if I wanted to I could never marry you," Helena said and Lord Edwin's gaze darkened with sadness.

"Why ever not?"

"Something happened during my stay in London," Helena began to explain, but he quickly cut her off.

"Miss Helena, you need not fear the scandal that has been brought upon you," he told her. "Countess Pirelli's proposition was a good one and, if you shall have me, I wish to accompany you."

Helena's mind spun then. She could not comprehend what he could possibly be saying. She remained silent as she wished not to muddle things further.

"Miss Helena, if you would allow me to, I would follow you to the ends of the earth," Lord Edwin sighed, and as he did so, he dropped down onto one knee before her. "All I ask is that you do me the honour of becoming my wife."

In that very moment, Helena realised the truth of the matter.

Lord Edwin did indeed love her. He spoke in such a way that it was as if he had jumped from one of the pages of the novels she'd had her nose in as a young girl, and she could scarcely believe it.

Even more so, she could not believe that he had ever wished to marry her out of pity. She suddenly felt so foolish for ever believing that he'd had such motives.

"Miss Helena Ashby, will you do me the great honour of marrying me?" Lord Edwin asked, as though he could no longer bear the silence.

"Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins, yes I shall marry you!" she replied in a voice so filled with excitement that it echoed about the gardens.

Lord Edwin surged up from his position, crouched close to the floor, to take her under her arms. He pulled her up into the air and spun with her as though she weighed little more than a feather.

As he stopped, her body slid down his until she rested upon her feet again. And when he leaned down to press his lips to hers, their promise to each other was sealed.

Chapter 16

Lord Edwin guided Miss Helena back to the drawing-room with his hand over hers where she clutched his forearm. The feel of her warm skin beneath his own caused him to smile fiercely.

"Why are you smiling like that, Lord Edwin?" she asked as they drew nearer to the door of the drawing-room.

"I believe it is time you simply began calling me Edwin," he told her and gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he looked down into her pretty eyes. "And I am smiling because you have made me the happiest of men."

Miss Helena blushed deeply, but her smile broadened to match the radiance of his.

"Let us go and share our good fortune," Edwin insisted. "It is about time we managed to spread some pleasant gossip in your name."

The way that Helena nodded told him she agreed with the statement.

He opened the door and guided her inside to find that Sir Joshua Makepeace had joined Countess Pirelli and Lady Claire. He was sat with the latter on one of the couches, but as soon as they entered, all three of the company hurried to their feet to greet them.

"Lord Edwin, Miss Helena." Sir Joshua greeted them with a formal bow before coming to shake Edwin's hand. "It is good to see you, although I do wish you had written ahead so that I might have been more prepared."

"I'm sorry, Sir Joshua. When Lady Claire received your letter that Miss Helena was staying here, I had to come and be sure that she was all right."

"Ah yes, the scandal. I had heard." Sir Joshua shook his head and Edwin found himself holding his breath. "Though I do not believe a word of it."

"I am glad to hear you say so." Edwin was relieved to know that his friend still had a good head on his shoulders.

"Do I detect some good news between the two of you?" Lady Claire asked as she stepped forward, examining the way that Miss Helena remained close to him even though she had slipped her hand from his arm.

"I believe that you do," Edwin nodded and he looked at Helena to find her smiling sheepishly. "Would you like to be the one to tell them, or shall I?"

"I fear I could not find the words to do it justice," Miss Helena shook her head. "I would be glad for you to tell them."

Edwin was pleased to have her permission, for he felt that if he did not speak of it soon, he might explode.

"Miss Helena and I are engaged to be married," he announced, and when he turned back to the rest of the party, there was a shocked excitement on every face.

"That is wonderful news!" Countess Pirelli was the first to speak. "I wish you both the very best of luck."

"It certainly is wonderful news," Sir Joshua agreed. "Why did you not tell me that you were going to propose?" He looked at Edwin with a deep scowl and Edwin was worried that he might have offended his friend.

"Oh, hush now, Sir Joshua," Lady Claire scolded him, though there was affection in her tone. "You have to admit it was a lovely surprise."

"Lovely indeed," Sir Joshua nodded. "Though I do hope that Miss Helena will not spend all of her time talking about weddings as though they are the only conversational topic of any importance."

He threw Lady Claire a playful glance and she began to chuckle.

"It is not all I talk about," she insisted before she came to stand before Miss Helena. She gripped hold of both her hands in hers and smiled. "This means we shall be family."

"I suppose it does," Miss Helena agreed, and Edwin was glad to see that she appeared to be happy at the prospect.

"Does this mean you shall be leaving the service of Lord Tompkins?" Sir Joshua put in and Edwin watched as his fiancée's face dropped.

"I had quite forgotten about all of that in the excitement of everything," she gasped and Edwin saw a flash of fear spread over her delightful face.

"You do not need to worry of that, my darling," Edwin assured her. "Lord Tompkins and I have already discussed your obligations, and he has freed you from any and all service regarding himself and his daughter."

"Oh, Lord Edwin! You can't possibly mean it!" Miss Helena exclaimed, and the happiness was as clear as day on her face. Edwin remembered all the times he had caught Lady Susan degrading her lady companion, and he was more than pleased to offer her the good news that it was over.

"Lord Tompkins feels that your debt is paid and there shall be no more talk of it," Lord Edwin assured her.

"You know what this calls for?" Sir Joshua spoke up then and he clapped his hands together as he added, "a celebration."

"Oh, there is no need for all of that," Edwin insisted. He had never been one for standing at the centre of attention.

"Nonsense!" Lady Claire quickly cut him off. "My dear Joshua is right. We shall have a celebration both for your engagement and Miss Helena's freedom from her wretched mistress."

The entire company chuckled.

"There really is no need," Miss Helena seemed to agree with her fiancé. "We don't wish to cause any trouble."

"It is no trouble at all," Sir Joshua insisted. "What kind of gentleman would I be if I did not host my best friend's engagement party?"

That was when the realisation truly sunk in for Edwin. He was engaged and when he looked at his bride-to-be, his heart swelled with pride.

"Please say yes, cousin," Lady Claire insisted, "It has been so long since we had anything like this to celebrate."

"Sir Joshua and Lady Claire are right," Countess Pirelli put in. "There is also the matter of Miss Helena's offer to tour Europe to celebrate. That is if this new revelation has not changed her mind on going?"

The countess looked at Miss Helena expectantly.

"She doesn't have to decide right this moment, but you both do have

to agree upon this party," Lady Claire insisted. "I will not be made to keep quiet about this!"

Edwin knew that there was no way his cousin was going to let it go.

"Give the lovely lady what she wants, Lord Edwin," Sir Joshua urged.

"If it will get the two of you off my back, then yes," Edwin finally agreed, and Lady Claire began to applaud as though it was the most exciting thing to have happened all year.

"I shall have all the invitations sent out today and we shall host the party tomorrow evening," Sir Joshua said, and Edwin sucked in a deep breath as he wondered what he had just let himself in for.

"Oh, this is going to be wonderful!" Lady Claire exclaimed happily. "The two of us married to the best of friends!"

Edwin watched as his cousin gripped hold of Helena's arm and began to guide her to the couch.

He was glad that the two of them got on so well. Having always been close to his cousin he wasn't sure how he would have coped if she had treated his fiancée the same way that most of the other noble ladies did.

"Lord Edwin, perhaps you might join me for a turn of the garden?" Sir Joshua suggested as he glanced over his shoulder at the ladies, who

had begun to talk in hushed tones about the wedding, although a date hadn't yet been set.

"Of course, Sir Joshua. Please excuse us, ladies." Edwin gave a bow to the three women before he began to follow his friend from the room.

It wasn't until they started to make their way around the garden that Sir Joshua chose to speak again.

"Lord Edwin, I know that you were pleased to give your permission for my courting Lady Claire," he sighed. "But I feel I must ask something else of you."

Edwin was suddenly concerned that his friend might have changed his mind on his intentions towards Edwin's cousin. He gritted his teeth as he imagined the kind of heartbreak Lady Claire would go through if Sir Joshua was to call the entire thing off.

"You are not having second thoughts, are you?" Edwin asked and he could not keep the worry from his voice.

"Oh good heavens, no." Sir Joshua shook his head. "Quite the contrary. I wish to ask you for your permission to ask for Lady Claire's hand."

Edwin was surprised by his friend's words. Even after the death of his cousin's father several years earlier, he had never imagined that anyone would see this as his responsibility. Though Lady Claire had lived beneath his roof since her father's death, and he did feel some responsibility towards her, he did not feel that he was the man to pick and choose who she should marry.

"Sir Joshua, you do not need my permission," Edwin insisted. "Lady Claire is perfectly capable of making up her own mind on the subject."

"Still, I feel I am obliged to ask for it," Sir Joshua said. Edwin paused in his walking then and gripped hold of his friend's shoulders so that he might look him directly in the eye.

"Sir Joshua Makepeace, you are my best friend and the best friend that any man could wish for. I would be honoured for you to marry my cousin."

Sir Joshua's face eased with relief, as though there had been any chance that he might have said no.

"You have no idea how glad that makes me!" Sir Joshua smiled brightly and at that moment Edwin knew that his friend loved Lady Claire just as much as he loved Miss Helena. There was a brightness in his eyes that Edwin had never seen before and he imagined it was the same brightness his own face held while Miss Helena was on his mind.

"Just promise me one thing," Edwin added then, still holding onto his friend's shoulders.

"Anything," Sir Joshua vowed.

"You must promise me that she will want for nothing, that you will take care of her no matter what the circumstances and you shall above

all else always be faithful to her," Edwin insisted, for he had already decided that both Lady Claire and Miss Helena deserved nothing less.

"I vow to you that I shall do all that and more," Sir Joshua promised, and Edwin pulled him into a tight bear hug, clapping him on the back with enthusiasm.

"Then you have my permission a hundred-fold, for I could never imagine a man more worthy of my cousin," he told his friend as he finally released him.

"That means the world to me," Sir Joshua said. "And you have my word that I shall wait until the news of your engagement has died down before proposing. Miss Helena deserves to have some good gossip spread about her for a change."

"Thank you, Sir Joshua." Edwin smiled back at his friend, for he knew that for as long as they remained friends, he would always have someone at his back. And now that he was to be married to Miss Helena, so would she.

Chapter 17

The way that Lady Claire flitted about the guest bedroom made Miss Helena smile. She had been doing an awful lot of smiling since Lord Edwin had professed his love, and she could not remember ever having been so happy.

"You know what this means, don't you, Miss Helena?" Lady Claire asked as she pulled a dress from the chest she'd had brought over from Lord Edwin's estate. "You and I are to be family."

"I suppose it does," Helena smirked. She had always feared the kind of family she might have were she to ever marry, and yet now she found she was quite pleased with it.

"We shall always be very close you and I," Lady Claire continued, "because not only are Lord Edwin and I, family but he and Sir Joshua are the best of friends."

Lady Claire was right again. Another thing that caused Helena to smile.

"We shall be married in the same year and, God willing, our children shall be born at similar times too," Lady Claire added. "Imagine the fun we shall have raising our children together, Miss Helena."

"Please, Lady Claire, simply call me Helena," she insisted as she sat

upon the stool beside the dressing table. "We are to be family after all."

"Then you must call me Claire or cousin Claire. You pick," Lady Claire replied with excitement. "Oh, Helena, it shall be wonderful. Our children shall grow up together and be the best of friends also."

Helena hoped that she was right.

When she closed her eyes, she imagined several children running about the garden at Lord Edwin's estate. The boys had Lord Edwin and Sir Joshua's olive-skinned colouring and athletic build, while the girls were paler and more delicate, as their mothers were.

It was a thought that brought Helena a great deal of joy, the kind of joy she thought might cause her heart to explode.

It would be some years before she had a whole brood of children, and yet she looked forward to it as she imagined the way that Lord Edwin would be with them. He had always been so kind to her and she knew that he would only grow in his kindness towards his children. He would be the best of fathers, Helena knew it.

She imagined how he would teach their sons to ride and hunt and write while she taught their daughters everything a lady needed to know. She was determined that every daughter of hers would have a similar education to the one she'd had. She would teach them to read and write no matter what the other nobles thought of teaching such things to women.

"Helena, what do you think of this dress?" Lady Claire asked as she held the dress she was holding up to her body and gave a great twirl. The skirt splayed out about her like an ocean of aquamarine.

"It is quite beautiful," Helena replied.

"Then you shall wear it!" Lady Claire insisted and she hung the dress over the end of the bed.

"I couldn't possibly," Helena protested. She had already borrowed quite enough from Lady Claire.

"What else did you have in mind to wear?" Lady Claire asked, and Helena realised with much embarrassment that she had nothing. The small amount of clothes she owned had all been left in London the moment she had fled the necklace scandal.

"As I thought," Lady Claire sighed, "Not to worry, Helena, you shall soon have an entirely new wardrobe."

Helena couldn't possibly imagine where she might get the money for that.

Seeing the thought cross Helena's face, Lady Claire added, "My dear. You are to be married to a lord. He shall dress you in the finest clothes and jewels. You shall never want for anything ever again."

Helena wasn't at all sure how she felt about that, but it was a small

price to pay for the husband she had so longed for.

Just then there was a polite knocking on the door and Lady Claire called, "Come in."

A moment later, not one but two maids slipped into the room. One she recognised as Lady Claire's lady's maid, Gwen. The other was Countess Pirelli's lady's maid, Sophia.

Both women were dressed similarly in dark grey dresses with white cotton aprons, yet while Gwen was fair-haired and pale-skinned, Sophia was quite the opposite with dark hair and an olive complexion, much like her mistress.

"Lady Claire, Miss Helena," Gwen smiled and the two maids gave a low curtsy each.

"Sophia has kindly offered to help me assist you both in dressing for dinner this evening," Gwen explained.

"Isn't that a lovely offer, Helena?" Lady Claire asked.

"Yes, it is very kind," Helena replied. "But doesn't Countess Pirelli need your assistance?"

"You need not worry, Miss Helena," Sophia shook her head. "I have already helped my lady to dress and she insisted that I could help Gwen."

"It's settled then!" Lady Claire clapped happily, "We must have you looking your best for your engagement party."

Helena still felt a small wave of shock whenever somebody mentioned her engagement.

It had been more than twenty-four hours since Lord Edwin had got down on one knee and still she could not quite bring herself to believe that it was really happening.

"Sophia, this is the dress that Miss Helena shall be wearing tonight," Lady Claire explained as she gestured towards the gown she had placed on the end of the bed.

"A fine choice, my lady," Sophia nodded as she looked over the dress.

"We should be getting a move on or the guests will be arriving before we are even dressed," Lady Claire said, and Gwen began to undo her lady's dress while Sophia came to help Miss Helena.

It wasn't very often that Helena had help from a lady's maid but she realised as Sophia undid the lacing of her borrowed dress that she would most likely have to get used to it. With all the events and such she would be attending as Lord Edwin's wife, it would be a great help not to be late just because she was struggling to lace up her own dress.

"We must offer you our congratulations, Miss Helena," Gwen said even

as she helped Lady Claire to slip out of her dress and into another that she had chosen from the trunk. "You have found yourself a wonderful match in Lord Edwin."

Helena listened for a moment wondering whether she might have heard sarcasm in the maid's voice, as she would have done from Lady Susan's maid. But there was none. It appeared that Gwen was as pleased as her mistress to see her engaged to Lady Claire's cousin.

"I must admit that I was worried for a while that Lord Edwin might actually follow through with his courting of Lady Susan," Gwen continued, and Helena noticed Sophia nodding behind her.

"It would have been a terrible shame," the other lady's maid agreed.

"It certainly would have indeed," Lady Claire put in with a nod, and Helena watched as the lady practically winced. "The thought of calling a sour woman like that Lady Martin-Atkins makes me feel quite ill."

"Then we are all lucky that Miss Helena beat her to it," Gwen smiled at her mistress, and they all began to laugh.

"I'm sure it wouldn't have been as bad as all that," Helena put in as politely as ever.

"Helena, you have always been far too polite to Lady Susan," Lady Claire argued. "She is a foul woman and I don't honestly know how you ever managed to put up with living with her at Haddington Hall."

"I suppose it was because I had no other choice," Helena admitted.

"If only my cousin had succeeded in insisting that Lord Tompkins allow him to pay off your father's debts," Lady Claire sighed, "You might have been married by now."

Helena paused halfway into stepping into the gown that Sophia was holding open for her.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and turned her attention to Lady Claire so that she might know the truth of what she had said.

"Oh, me and my big mouth!" Lady Claire, who was already having her dress laced up, suddenly brought her palm to her mouth.

"Lady Claire, please tell me what you mean?" Helena asked.

"I really shouldn't have said anything but when I managed to get the truth from my cousin on his feelings for you and we learnt that you were staying with Sir Joshua, Edwin told me that he had approached Lord Tompkins some months ago to settle your father's debts, but Lord Tompkins would not allow him to."

"But why would he do that?" Helena was utterly astonished then. Lord Edwin had always been kind to her but something like that was above and beyond.

"Why, because he holds a great love for you, of course," Lady Claire insisted. "Whenever he returned from Haddington Hall, I found him quite beside himself. I had thought it was because he had been in the company of Lady Susan, but I have since seen that it was concern for you that made him so."

Helena's heart skipped a beat at the thought that her situation could grieve Lord Edwin so. She closed her eyes as she thought of the moment when she had refused to marry him, believing that he had proposed out of pity. How could she have been so foolish? A man who was willing to spend such a large sum of money just to see her free of her father's debt could only have done so out of love.

"I fear I was quite unkind to Lord Edwin," Helena sighed when she opened her eyes again. "I thought he meant to marry me out of pity, but I see now that I was wrong."

"You most certainly were, Helena," Lady Claire nodded and scowled at her. "I have never seen my cousin so aggrieved as the day he returned to Haddington Hall after he had proposed to you. I did not know it at the time but I see why he was so upset now."

"It has all worked out in the end, has it not?" Gwen pointed out, and Helena offered the woman a grateful smile for trying to ease her guilt.

"Gwen is right," Lady Claire nodded. "We shall think of the past no more. We must look to the future."

With that Lady Claire swept across the room to look at Helena. "We must do something pretty with your hair."

She gestured Gwen over to the trunk that she'd had brought from Lord Edwin's estate. "Gwen, fetch one of the tiaras from the trunk. Perhaps the one with the sapphires. It will look lovely with Helena's dress."

Even as the maid went to the trunk, Helena began to protest. "I cannot possibly wear a tiara."

Never in her life had she worn one and until she was safely married to her lord husband, she feared she had no business to do so.

"Of course you must!" Lady Claire insisted. "We must have you looking your best for your announcement this evening."

"I do believe that Lady Susan will be quite jealous when she sees you," Gwen smiled as she handed the tiara to her mistress and Lady Claire placed it delicately on Helena's head. "I only wish I were allowed to be there to see it."

"I promise I will tell you all about it in the morning." Lady Claire chuckled and it was clear to see that she and her lady's maid were very close. One might even call them friends. She could only hope that whoever her own lady's maid turned out to be in the future that she might have the same relationship.

She had never much believed in being indifferent to the servants. Lady Susan had often mocked her for being so friendly with the servants at Haddington Hall. She was determined not to be like Lady Susan when she had servants of her own.

"This will look quite lovely if we can do something about your hair," Lady Claire explained. "Sophia, perhaps you might suggest something?"

"I am sure I can come up with something," the maid replied with a smile.

"Yes, Countess Pirelli's hair always looks so lovely," Lady Claire agreed.

"Thank you, Lady Claire. I must say, I do take pride in my work." Sophia blushed at the lady's compliment.

"As you should!" Lady Claire nodded.

"Miss Helena, if you'd like to sit, I can do your hair for you." Sophia gestured over to the stool beside the dressing table where Helena had been sitting when they had arrived.

"Thank you, Sophia. I am very grateful to you," Helena said as she sat down and looked in the mirror to see the tiara that was precariously balanced on top of her head.

Before long, both Helena and Lady Claire were dressed and ready to go down to greet the guests that would be arriving any minute.

Helena could not help but look at herself in the mirror one last time. The aquamarine dress was beautiful paired with silver shoes and earrings, while the matching silver tiara nestled in an intricate mass of curls. Several small curls grazed the nape of her neck causing her throat to look longer than it was.

Sophia had done a wonderful job of her hair and makeup, and Helena found that she could not have been happier.

"You look magnificent," Lady Claire told her, and when Helena turned to look at her, she found that Lady Claire was dressed similarly, although her own gown was a pale shade of coral and there were rubies in her tiara. Gold droplet earrings hung from her ears just barely grazing her shoulders.

"As do you," Helena insisted.

"This night is not about me," Lady Claire pointed out. "It is about you and cousin Edwin."

Helena felt nerves begin to bubble in her stomach.

"Lady Claire, Miss Helena, Lord Edwin awaits you in the hall," Gwen announced, and Helena felt her heart skip a beat. She hadn't seen him since he had returned home after Sir Joshua's proposal to host their engagement party.

"Well then, we must not keep him waiting." Lady Claire made her way

to the door and gestured for Helena to follow her.

They made their way out into the hallway where Lord Edwin greeted them with a gracious bow.

Lady Claire and Helena offered him a curtsy in return.

"Cousin, you look lovely this evening, he told Lady Claire, but it wasn't until he turned his full attention to Helena that his mouth practically dropped open. "Oh, my dear Miss Helena, you look practically heavenly."

"My sentiments exactly," Lady Claire agreed.

Helena blushed a bright red at Lord Edwin's compliment.

"You are quite handsome, yourself, Lord Edwin," she replied, and she gave Lady Claire a quick accusatory glance at the realisation that her husband-to-be was wearing similar colouring to her gown.

Though his jacket and trousers were navy, the waistcoat beneath was a striking aquamarine with silver embroidery.

No doubt it would be noticed long before they announced their engagement that they were dressed in a similar fashion. No doubt the gossip would begin to spread as soon as they were seen together. No doubt that had been Lady Claire's plan all along.

"Lady Claire, Miss Helena, might you allow me to escort you down to the hall?" Lord Edwin asked as he slipped between them and offered each of them an arm. "The other guests have begun arriving."

Helena did not hesitate to take his arm, though Lady Claire shook her head and declined politely.

"I am sure that Sir Joshua shall be along shortly," she told them. "Please go ahead without me."

"As you wish," Lord Edwin smiled, and he began to lead Helena along the landing.

"Lord Edwin, I fear I must apologise," Helena told him once they were out of earshot of Lady Claire.

"Whatever for?" Lord Edwin paused and drew them to a halt so that they might converse alone.

"Lady Claire told me what you tried to do to free me from my father's debts," she explained. "It was a great undertaking on your part and I fear now that I grievously misjudged your original marriage proposal."

"It is all in the past now," Lord Edwin insisted. "We need not think of any of it again."

"But still, I must apologise for my misjudgment of you and thank you for what you attempted to do," Helena assured him, and she gave his forearm a gentle squeeze. "You shall never know how much it means to me that you tried."

"Miss Helena, there is nothing that I wouldn't do just to see you happy," Lord Edwin told her, and Helena's heart swelled causing the corners of her lips to turn upwards in an altogether happy smile.

"You are like no other gentleman I have ever met," she said.

"And you are like no other gentle lady I have ever met," he countered.

They remained there for several moments simply gazing into each other's eyes.

It was Helena who finally broke the moment, concerned that there might be gossip if they were found alone together in such a manner.

"We should be getting downstairs," she told him and Lord Edwin nodded.

As they began to walk, he placed his hand on top of hers.

Chapter 18

Even as Lord Edwin led his fiancée down the stairs, he found that the hallway was beginning to fill with people, each one of them being led into the drawing-room to await the dinner bell.

He recognised every face as he slipped through with Miss Helena on his arm, bowing his head in greeting as he made his own way to the drawing-room.

"Miss Helena," the voice that sounded behind them was one that Edwin had hoped not to hear, especially here. How could Sir Joshua have been so stupid as to invite her?

"Lady Susan." Miss Helena turned with grace and dignity and Edwin was proud to see that she did not falter.

"I must admit, I am very surprised to see you here," Lady Susan exclaimed, and Edwin noticed the way that she watched how closely they were stood to each other. The suspicion on her face was almost painful to watch. "I had thought you would be staying in London longer. Why did you not call back home?"

The woman clasped her hands before her as though she was simply conversing with any other noble in the drawing-room, but Edwin knew she was really interrogating them. She knew as well as he did that Miss Helena's obligations to her family were over.

"Forgive me, Lady Susan, but Haddington Hall is not and has never been my home," Miss Helena sighed. "Lord Edwin has been kind enough to offer me a place to stay until I can find a more permanent residence."

"What a shame," Lady Susan sighed, although there was a malicious tone to her voice. "I had hoped we had become friends."

Miss Helena looked as though she was about to make an altogether unkind remark, and Edwin didn't blame her. But just then they were distracted by the arrival of Countess Pirelli.

"Lord Edwin, Miss Helena, I had hoped that I might be able to have a word?" The beautiful Italian woman smiled at them both before she turned to Lady Susan with what was clearly false politeness. "Would you mind if I was to steal them away from you, Lady Susan?"

Knowing that Countess Pirelli was quite above her station, she simply gave a curtsy and nodded. "Of course not, Countess Pirelli."

Edwin watched with relief as Lady Susan disappeared into the crowd of nobles.

"Is everything all right, Countess Pirelli?" Edwin asked. "What did you need to speak with us about?"

"Oh, nothing," Countess Pirelli chuckled, pursing her lips in an attempt to hide it. "I could simply see how uncomfortable Lady Susan was making you both."

"Thank you, Countess." Miss Helena placed a hand of gratitude on the other woman's forearm. "We are both very grateful."

"Don't mention it," Countess Pirelli smiled warmly. "If only that young lady could learn some respect, I wouldn't have had to."

"Perhaps we should retire to the drawing-room to wait for the dinner gong?" Edwin suggested, and he offered an arm to both Miss Helena and the countess.

"Yes, of course." Countess Pirelli smiled as they each took his arm.

Even as he held the two women through to the drawing-room where several other guests had begun to gather, he couldn't help but notice that there were many eyes on them.

No matter where he glanced, he could see the wagging of chins as gossip began to spread.

For once he was not bothered by it, for he knew that by the end of the night all their questions would be answered.

"Miss Helena?" It was Lord Yarmouth's voice that caused them both to look around. Edwin instantly wondered where Lady Winifred might have been. No doubt she was trying to find Lady Susan so they might begin concocting their next wave of gossip.

He cringed at the thought of it.

Miss Helena offered Lord Yarmouth a curtsy even as he bowed his head in greeting.

"It's lovely to see you again, Lord Yarmouth," she said politely, though knowing her as he did, Edwin knew that it was forced. He didn't blame her. After all the man had taken over the house she had once called home.

"And you, Miss Helena, Lord Edwin, Countess Pirelli."

Lord Yarmouth gave quick acknowledgement of the company she kept before turning back to Miss Helena. "I must say how sorry I was to hear of your father's passing."

Lord Edwin was shocked by the mention. Miss Helena's father had passed some time ago. Surely the lord might have sent words of condolence before now.

"Thank you, Lord Yarmouth," Miss Helena replied, clearly unwilling to confront him on it.

Edwin was about to make a comment himself when the loud ringing of the dinner gong sounded over the chattering voices.

"Well, it sounds as though it is time for dinner," Lord Yarmouth said before he asked, "Miss Helena, might you allow me to escort you into the dining room?"

Miss Helena glanced quickly at Edwin with worry in her eyes, as though she thought he might take offence. But Edwin smiled and gave her a brief nod. He had no trouble with one of her relatives escorting her. After all, it would be the very last time. After they were engaged, he would have no need to allow anyone else to do so.

"Countess Pirelli, would you do me the honour?" Edwin asked the striking Italian.

"The honour would be all mine," Countess Pirelli replied as she took his hand, and they began to follow Lord Yarmouth and Miss Helena through to the dining room.

"Lord Edwin, Miss Helena," Lady Claire spoke up from close to the head of the table, as though she had been waiting for them. "You must both come and sit beside Sir Joshua and me!"

Sir Joshua, who was already stood at the very head of the table, looked as if he were struggling not to smile as murmuring began to erupt around the room of nobles who were all taking to their seats.

Lord Edwin guided Countess Pirelli down one side of the table even as Lord Yarmouth took Miss Helena down the other.

He was relieved when she slipped into the place opposite him, sitting them on either side of the head of the table.

Lady Claire had clearly demoted herself to the seat beside Miss Helena for the evening, due to their announcement.

Edwin was pleased. Though he had never had the joy of sitting right beside Miss Helena during a dinner, having her facing him was the closest he had ever been.

If he had been less of a gentleman, he might have reached out with his boot to graze her foot.

"Please be seated," Sir Joshua told his guests once each of them was stood before one of the fine gold-coloured dining chairs.

Each noble sat in almost perfect unison.

Even over the noise of the chairs moving Edwin heard Lady Susan hiss from a few places down the table, "Why does she get to sit at the head of the table?"

Glancing down he saw without surprise that she had seated herself beside Lady Winifred.

Edwin had never been a vain man or a disrespectful one, but at that moment, he couldn't wait to knock her down a peg or two.

The dinner went as any before it: a three-course meal with talk, laughter and the usual gossip.

Edwin was beginning to find it all quite tiresome and his only saving grace was being able to look upon Miss Helena, even though she seemed to be careful not to offer him too much attention before their announcement was made.

It wasn't until the main course plates had been removed to make way for dessert that Sir Joshua picked up his wine glass and tapped it with his spoon. "May I have everyone's attention?"

Edwin's heart skipped a beat then, for he knew that the time had come.

The room fell utterly silent, so silent in fact that it was almost eerie.

"I do believe that my friend Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins has an announcement that he wishes to make," Sir Joshua explained, turning all attention to him.

Edwin took a deep breath before pushing his chair back with the backs of his knees to stand.

"Thank you, Sir Joshua," he said as he straightened the buttons on his jacket.

When he looked down at the rest of the table, every face was turned to look at him. The sea of intrigued faces was enough to make him smile as he thought about what he was about to tell them.

"I am sure that you are all wondering why Sir Joshua invited you all here this evening, as the date is nothing special," Edwin began, and he turned all his attention to Miss Helena, who was blushing back at him. He found himself wondering whether she might blush like that when he met her at the end of the aisle during their wedding.

"The truth is, Sir Joshua invited you all here so that I might make an announcement," Edwin continued, and for a moment the room was filled with excited chatter. When it died down again, he added, "Last evening I asked Miss Helena if she would do me the great honour of being my wife."

There were several shocked gasps, the loudest of which coming from Lady Susan, even as others began to applaud.

"Congratulations to you both!" Lord Yarmouth was the first to offer his congratulations.

"Wonderful news!" Lord Tompkins added, much to his daughter's disgust.

"Please excuse me!" Lady Susan said suddenly, and she was on her feet before anyone could make a protest.

Edwin turned just in time to see Lady Winifred hurry after her.

It was of little consequence as the rest of the nobles began to add their congratulations and best wishes.

"To Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins and Miss Helena Ashby!" Sir Joshua yelled above the noise, and lifted his wine glass to toast them.

"To Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins and Miss Helena Ashby!" the rest of the table repeated as they too lifted their glasses.

Chapter 19

The last person that Miss Helena believed would approach her in the ballroom after dinner was Lady Susan.

Several other noblemen and ladies had already been over to offer their congratulations, but it was Lady Susan's sudden appearance that startled her.

"Miss Helena." The woman gave a curt nod as she approached.

"Lady Susan," Helena replied with the same cool nod.

"I came to offer my congratulations," Lady Susan said, although Helena couldn't help but wonder if she heard an ingenuine tone to her voice. "I must admit I was completely stunned at Lord Edwin's announcement."

"I'm sure you were," was all Helena could think of in response. She was quite dumbfounded to even see the lady before her.

"I do hope, for your sake, that all goes well." Lady Susan's words seemed to hold a barely veiled threat.

Helena was about to respond when she heard her name called from

behind her.

She looked around to find Lady Claire sweeping towards her through the crowd.

"Miss Helena, you must sing for us!" she exclaimed with a brilliant smile, and several others turned to offer their agreement.

"I..." Helena began to say that she was just speaking to Lady Susan, but when she turned back again the woman was nowhere to be seen. Helena scanned the crowd for a moment, but it appeared that she was gone from the room entirely.

"Come, you must sing for us!" Lady Claire insisted as she gripped her arm and began to guide her towards the pianoforte.

For the first time, Helena was not overly nervous to sing in front of an entire party. Having been the object of so much gossip and scandal over the years, she finally felt as though she had their attention for altogether better reasons.

When Lady Claire took to the piano, Helena stood beside her and waited for her to begin. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply and waited. When Lady Claire began to play, she opened her eyes again and began to sing, watching as both men and women alike paused their conversations to listen to her.

Clasping her hands before her, Helena smiled as she sang, looking out on the sea of faces of people who were all intent upon her. For the first time in her life, she noticed that not a single one of them

appeared to be gossiping. Each noble was silent, content to listen to her with a smile upon his or her face. It wasn't until her eyes were drawn to the back of the room that she felt her heart skip a beat.

Standing at the back of the room, leaning against a doorframe, was her love. He gazed back at her intently as their gazes locked, and she suddenly felt as though she was singing just for him.

Everyone else in the room seemed to fade away as she sang and suddenly, they were alone. Her words connected them in such a way that it made her entire body tingle with love.

The moment was lost to her when she suddenly noticed Lady Susan approaching. The woman, dressed in navy blue, was like a dark shadow on Helena's happiness as she leaned into Lord Edwin to whisper something into his ear.

When he turned towards her Helena became sickened by the closeness of their faces.

Heat boiled up in her face as she watched Lady Susan reach out to touch his arm. Nausea rose in her chest when he did not pull away.

Something passed between them, the likes of which Helena had never seen before.

Holding her composure for as long as possible, she finished her song and took a bow as the room erupted with applause.

Trembling with fear at what she had just witnessed, she hurried to envelope herself in the crowd again, but it appeared she had not moved quickly enough as Lady Susan shot her a glance that appeared to be a warning.

It became obvious to Helena at that moment that Lady Susan had not yet given up her intentions towards Lord Edwin. Helena could only hope that his love for her was strong enough to overcome whatever she threw at them.

For one brief moment, Helena suddenly found herself wondering whether she was wrong to accept Lord Edwin's proposal. How could she ever hope to compete with a woman of such breeding as Lady Susan?

The thought stabbed her in the stomach and she quickly retired to the ladies' powder room before anyone could hope to stop her.

"You are being silly," she told her reflection in the mirror that hung above the sink. Though when she looked at herself in it, she couldn't help but wonder what Lord Edwin could have possibly seen in her.

Though she was dressed well and decorated in the finest jewels, thanks to Lady Claire, she could still see the poor girl hiding beneath. She had not yet been washed entirely clean of scandal and she was not sure that she ever would be.

Closing her eyes and holding on to the counter for support, she tried her hardest not to allow whatever intimate moment had passed between Lord Edwin and Lady Susan to get to her.

She would not allow that insufferable woman to take her joy from her, especially not tonight.

Tonight, she was Lord Edwin's fiancée, and that was all that mattered.

Chapter 20

"Is everything all right?" Lady Claire asked as she swept up to join Lord Edwin and Sir Joshua towards the back of the ballroom. "I couldn't help but notice that Miss Helena appears awfully quiet."

She glanced towards the young woman and Lord Edwin followed her gaze to find her talking to Lord Yarmouth.

Her face was downcast, not at all the face of a blushing bride-to-be. He couldn't help but wonder what could be wrong. Perhaps she was having second thoughts on accepting his proposal.

"I'm sure she is just tired," Sir Joshua put in gently. "It has been a long evening and the night is wearing on."

"I'm sure you are right," Lady Claire agreed. "Perhaps we should all remain here tonight in the guest rooms?"

"A wonderful idea, Lady Claire," Sir Joshua nodded. "It would be silly for you all to travel back tonight when I can have rooms made up for you."

"Thank you, Sir Joshua, but I would like to get Miss Helena home so that she can be comfortable," Lord Edwin protested.

It was then that the doors to the ballroom suddenly burst open and he instantly feared that his hopes would be quashed.

The stern men in dark suits who entered could have been none other than bailiffs from Marshalsea. He recognised their uniforms well from his visits to see Sir Randal Ashby.

One quick glance at Miss Helena told him that she had seen them too. The horror on her face told him she was remembering those same visits.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sir Joshua Makepeace demanded as he slipped between Edwin and his cousin to go to the bailiffs, who were already looking around the room as though they had a target in mind.

"Forgive us Sir Joshua, but we have news of a wanted felon within your midst," the lead bailiff explained.

"There is no such person here!" Sir Joshua snapped, even as Edwin hurried to join his friend.

Though he wasn't sure, he had a good idea of whom they were speaking.

Edwin suddenly remembered his encounter earlier with Lady Susan and the way she had leaned in to whisper in his ear, "Tonight shall be the most marvellous of nights."

There had been malicious intent in her words, but Edwin had brushed it off as an idle threat.

Now when he found her in the crowd, he saw that she was coming towards them with obvious intent in her eyes.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming!" she exclaimed as she joined them.

"Lady Susan Tompkins," the bailiff greeted her politely with a bow of her head. "Could you point out the lady in question?"

"Certainly, sir. Though I fear she is no lady." Lady Susan's voice was a hiss as she turned and lifted her finger to point accusingly through the crowd.

As Edwin followed her delicate finger, he felt his heart stop. The trail ended at Miss Helena, whose horrified expression had turned to one of outright shock.

The two bailiffs crossed the ballroom floor where several couples had paused in their dancing to witness the commotion.

"Miss Helena Ashby, I am afraid I am going to have to ask you to come with us," the lead bailiff explained.

"This is ridiculous!" Edwin finally said as he hurried to his fiancée's side. "What could you possibly want with her?"

"Miss Helena is wanted at Marshalsea on charges of theft," the bailiff explained, and when he looked upon Edwin, there was a stern expression on his face.

"I will not allow this!" Sir Joshua protested. "Not in my house! Miss Helena is no thief."

"I am just doing my job, Sir Joshua," the bailiff insisted. "Miss Helena, you must come with us or things will get much worse."

"Where is your proof?" Lady Claire demanded, and when Edwin looked at his cousin he saw her face was flushed with outrage.

"Check Lord Edwin's pocket," Lady Susan was the one to speak up in a tone dripping with hatred. "I saw Miss Helena slip something inside after dinner."

Edwin felt sick to his stomach as he remembered how close Lady Susan had leaned into him during their earlier conversation.

The bailiff turned his attention to Edwin and gestured towards the pocket of his jacket. "May I?"

Edwin glanced at Miss Helena to see her gazing back at him with fear in her darkened eyes.

"I have nothing to hide," Edwin replied. Though he was fearful of what he might find. He knew that there was no way Miss Helena had placed it there.

He opened the buttons of his jacket to allow the bailiff to check every pocket.

Just as he began to hope that Lady Susan's plan had failed, the bailiff came to the last pocket. He dipped his hand inside and paused. "What have we here?"

He removed his hand then, a silver bracelet clasped between his fingers.

"Is this the jewellery in question?" he asked as he held it up for the entire room to see.

There were shocked gasps all around the room as Lady Susan began to nod.

"I didn't put that there!" Miss Helena exclaimed. "I have never seen that bracelet before!"

"Do not lie, Miss Helena," Lady Susan scoffed. "I'm sure you laid eyes on it many times while you were my companion at Haddington Hall."

Edwin felt sick at the woman's deceit, although he could see no good

would come of voicing it.

"Miss Helena, do not say another word," he advised her, for he feared that if she spoke again her words might be used against her.

"Edwin?" Miss Helena's voice was a terrified squeak as she turned her face up to look at him and placed her hand upon his forearm for support.

Her face had become so pale that he feared she might faint.

Placing his hand upon hers, he squeezed her fingers. "It's all right, my love."

Though his words seemed to calm her, there was fear on her face and he knew that there was nothing she feared more than the Marshalsea debtors' prison.

Edwin could not blame her. After all the place had taken her father from her in more ways than one.

"I will fix this, my love, I promise you that," he vowed, even as the bailiff gripped hold of her other arm to drag her away from him.

"Please come with us," the bailiff insisted, even as the room was filled with astonished gasps.

"Take your hands off her," Edwin demanded before sighing. "She will go with you."

"This is preposterous!" Sir Joshua exclaimed, even as Miss Helena was led from the room.

All Edwin could do was watch her go, distraught in the knowledge that if she spent any length of time in the Marshalsea, it would destroy her.

"We shall fix this, cousin Edwin," Lady Claire assured him as she came to stand beside him. "Lady Susan will rue this day."

Even as she mentioned the lady, Edwin saw her at the door of the ballroom. She glared back at him with such a malicious expression that he knew he would hate her for as long as he lived.

Guilt erupted in his stomach as he realised one thing for certain. This was all his fault.

If he had stayed away from Miss Helena then Lady Susan would have never painted a target upon her back.

He was the cause and now he simply knew he had to be the cure. He would not rest until he had freed his love from every scandal surrounding her.

"Fellowes!" Sir Joshua yelled at the top of his voice to his butler. "Please see my guests out. I fear this party is over."

The butler gave a curt nod and began to sweep around the room to let Sir Joshua's guests know that the proceedings were finished.

"You must stay here tonight," Sir Joshua insisted, but Edwin quickly shook his head.

"I must go home and figure out a way out of this mess," he told his friend. "I cannot rest until Miss Helena is safely away from that dreadful place."

"Cousin, there may be nothing to be done tonight," Lady Claire sighed. "We should rest here and work it all out in the morning."

Edwin shook his head again. A headache was beginning to form behind his eyes and he knew that even if he tried, he would not rest.

He could imagine Miss Helena cold, alone and scared in a cell at Marshalsea, and he knew that the thought would not leave him until he had followed through on his promise to her.

"You remain here if you wish," Edwin told his cousin. He knew that his journey home would be much quicker if he was alone. "I shall leave the carriage here to take you home when you are ready, if Sir Joshua would lend me a horse?"

"Of course, Lord Edwin. Though are you quite sure that you should be travelling alone?" Sir Joshua asked.

"I assure you I will be fine," Edwin nodded.

Chapter 21

Riding up to the Marshalsea debtors' prison was something Miss Helena remembered well from her journey to see her father when he was incarcerated. Though she had been fearful then of what might come to pass, she was absolutely terrified now.

Tears threatened at the corners of her eyes, but she was determined not to allow them to fall. She would be strong. Not just for her own sake but for Lord Edwin's also.

He had promised her that he would correct the wrongs done to her. She wasn't sure how he would do it but she believed him. She had to. Otherwise, all hope would be lost to her.

The huge iron gates creaked as they opened and the cart slipped through the gatehouse.

The bailiffs sitting on either side of her were stern, stone-still fellows who stunk of tobacco and whisky. No doubt they had been called away from some kind of entertainment to apprehend her.

The fear she had felt upon their arrival at Sir Joshua Makepeace's estate had now begun to subside. During the long journey to the prison, they had been quite polite, if only a little rough around the edges.

When the cart stopped in the yard, the gates began to close behind them and Helena could only pray that it would not be long before she saw the other side again.

The bailiff holding the reins of the two brown mares pulled them to a complete halt before the other climbed down from the cart and offered up his hand to her.

"Please, come with me, Miss Helena," he said politely, although there was a stern edge to his voice.

She did not protest as she placed her hand in his and allowed him to help her down from the seat.

Relief washed over her as she stood. After so long sitting, she had begun to ache terribly. It felt good to stretch her legs. Another thing she feared she might miss once she found herself in one of the cells. God only knew when she would be able to do so again.

The bailiff released her hand once her feet were firmly planted on the floor and she stroked her palms down the front of her dress to right the wrinkles.

"Kindly follow me, Miss Helena," the bailiff told her as he turned to enter the prison.

She hesitated only a moment before following. The sound of footsteps behind her told her that the second bailiff was following also. Even had she had a mind to run, she knew it would do no good.

The bailiffs led her through a dank corridor and through a wrought iron gate that led to a double-width staircase. It led both up and down but it appeared that the bailiffs were set to lead her descent into the bowels of the earth.

A lump formed in her throat and grew with every step she took. Deeper and deeper they went into the earth until she feared she might never see sunlight again.

The only light was that of oil lamps set into the walls at intervals, highlighting the damp stone that housed them.

At the bottom of the staircase was a second iron gate, which the first bailiff unlocked and gestured her through. "Through you go, miss."

As she entered the next hallway, she realised that it was lined with cells. Several pairs of eyes gazed back at her from the darkness as she passed each by. The lump in her throat was hard to breathe past now as she imagined being thrown into one of the cells alongside a host of other prisoners. She had no way of knowing the kind of people she would be housed with.

"You are lucky, Miss Helena," the first bailiff told her as they reached the final cell on the left. "We have an empty cell for you."

Relief overwhelmed her for a moment. At least she would not be housed with real thieves and criminals. She could await Lord Edwin's promise in solitude.

Yet when the bailiff unlocked the cell door, she found that she was a little less relieved.

Inside was a single straw mattress on the floor. Laid atop it was a folded grey blanket that was threadbare and looked as though it had been lunch for the moths.

The sound of scurrying feet and squeaks told her she would not be entirely alone. The bucket in the corner twitched as if knocked by a small creature.

"Please step inside, Miss Helena," the bailiff insisted.

Helena closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply for a moment to calm herself but the air was wet and smelled of mildew.

When she opened them again both bailiffs were looking at her expectantly.

"Please don't make us use force," the bailiff threatened and she quickly stepped into the cell.

The door, made of iron bars, was quickly slammed shut behind her and the sound of the key turning in the lock made her feel nauseous.

"Make yourself comfortable," the second bailiff half chuckled, as though he knew it was a near-impossible task. "The first night is

always the longest."

With that, the bailiff's footsteps began to recede away from the cell and she was left alone in the near-darkness.

The only light was that of an oil lamp set into the wall outside of the cell. It cast long shadows onto the cobbled floor. Her own shadow loomed the longest against the back wall, making her look much taller than she was and she could only wish that she was as big and strong as it made her appear.

Still she would not cry as she settled herself down onto the straw mattress and threw the thin blanket over herself.

Even as she leaned against the damp wall she felt guilty at how the moisture soaked into her borrowed dress.

How am I to return it to Lady Claire? Helena asked herself. She doubted that the lady would even want it now. By the time she was released, it would likely be totally ruined. That was if she was ever released.

She tried her hardest not to think of it even as she heard the soft moans and whimpers coming from the other cells along the corridors.

How long had the other prisoners been here? Had they been placed in the bowels of the earth and left to rot there for all eternity? How many of the cells' inhabitants had ever seen daylight again?

These questions and many more flitted through her mind as the hours passed.

Nothing seemed to change around her except for the ebb and flow of snoring and sounds of wakefulness of the other prisoners.

Several times she thought to call out to converse with the people in the next cell and several more she thought against it.

No doubt she was as alone an outcast as she was in high society. There she had been no lady and in here she was no real criminal. Never would she find her place in the world.

Some hours had passed, though Helena could never know how many, when the sound of footsteps began to come towards her cell again.

For a moment she prayed that whoever it was would stop at one of the earlier cells and leave her be.

When that did not happen, she found the door to her cell being unlocked.

Looking up from her place on the mattress she saw the face of the same bailiff who had locked her away.

"Miss Helena Ashby, there is a visitor for you," he announced as he pushed open the door.

Helena was quick to her feet, brushing off her dress, although she knew it wouldn't do much good. Her hair had begun to fall out of its pins and the skirt of her dress was soaked with moisture. Her legs were cold and there were goose-pimples all over her.

She held her breath as the visitor stepped into the light beside the bailiff.

"Lord Edwin!" she gasped and barely managed to stop herself from leaping into his arms as he stepped into the cell.

"You have five minutes," the bailiff told them as he closed the door and locked it again.

With that the bailiff turned his back, remaining beside the door so as not to leave them unchaperoned.

"Miss Helena, I am grievously upset to find you here," Lord Edwin sighed as he looked about the cell. "I cannot believe they would house you in such a place."

"I used the last of the money from my mother's bracelet to get back to Surrey," Helena admitted. "Otherwise I might have been able to purchase better accommodation, as my father did."

"If you are to be here for any length of time, I shall see it righted," Lord Edwin assured her.

"You are very kind, Lord Edwin, though I fear I do not deserve it," Helena sighed.

"How many times must I remind you to call me Edwin?" His mouth twitched up in a saddened smile then and Helena couldn't help but mirror it.

"I will see you released from this place if it is the last thing I do," he vowed. "No fiancée of mine deserves a place like this."

"Do you have many?" Helena chuckled in an attempt to lighten the mood. It was all she could do to stop herself from weeping.

"Only one," Edwin responded. "And I never plan to have another so I must get you out of here as soon as possible so that we might marry."

Helena was dumbfounded at that.

"Even after all that has happened, you still intend to marry me?" she asked, unable to believe that he could be so willing as to marry a woman whose name was so scandalised.

"Even after all that has happened," he assured her.

He stepped forwards then and for one brief moment she believed he would touch her. When his arms remained at his sides, she found herself most disappointed.

"I know that you have done no wrong," he added. "Even if nobody else believes it, I do."

"How can you be so sure?" Helena asked and her cheeks began to blush. It was almost painful for her cheeks were so cold.

"I know your heart, Helena, and I know you would never do anything such as this." Edwin's belief in her was enough to light a fire in her stomach that she knew would keep her warm for several hours at least.

Her body may have been cold but her soul was blazing hot with the knowledge that he loved her. She clung onto it as a drowning woman would a lifebelt.

"I don't understand what I ever did to deserve you," she sighed.

Edwin looked as though he was about to tell her when the bailiff suddenly shifted to place the key in the lock.

"Time's up," he announced as he unlocked the door and shoved it open again. "Lord Edwin, please exit the cell at once."

Helena stood stock still in shock as Lord Edwin leaned forwards to place his lips against her forehead.

"I will do whatever it takes," he vowed again before disappearing from the cell once more.

Helena's forehead tingled even as the door was locked and she placed her fingertips where he had kissed her, holding onto the moment for as long as she could.

Chapter 22

Having seen Miss Helena instead of returning home as he had promised his cousin and his friend, Lord Edwin knew he would not sleep easy. The cell within which she was being housed was dreadful and he would not see her in it a moment longer than necessary.

Determined to have her freed, he climbed up onto his borrowed mare and slipped beneath the Marshalsea gatehouse.

The sound of the gates closing behind him made him cringe inwardly.

Turning the mare in the direction of Haddington Hall, he kicked her harder than he ought to and began to charge headlong down the lane.

Even as he raced towards the Tompkins estate the heavens began to open as though they were weeping for the wronged woman he had left behind.

Just as he breached the hill and the estate came into view the first signs of dawn began to appear on the horizon.

Miss Helena had survived her first night in Marshalsea and if he had his way, she would not see another.

Pulling his horse to a harsh stop in the yard of Haddington Hall, he slipped from the saddle and raced up the stone steps to the door.

Pounding on the wood like a mad man, he did not stop until he heard the sound of the key turning in the lock.

"Lord Martin-Atkins!" the butler gasped in shock as soon as he saw him. He stood on the threshold, dripping wet and blue from the cold.

"I must see your master at once," he insisted as he barged his way inside. All thoughts of etiquette were gone. He had little need of them now, especially in a house that was home to such a monster as Lady Susan Tompkins.

"I'm afraid the lord is still abed," the butler told him. "Perhaps I might take a message."

"No, you will not take a message," Edwin snarled, angered at the way the butler attempted to brush him off. "You will fetch me your lord right this instant or I shall drag him from his bed myself."

Anger was seething from Edwin as he removed his jacket to let it dry.

"Lord Edwin! What is the meaning of this?" Lady Susan's startled voice came from the top of the staircase and he looked up to see her descending. She was wearing a long flowing black robe, barely hiding the white nightgown she wore beneath. Her hair fell down her shoulder in a thick braid tied with a blue ribbon. "It's not even dawn yet."

"I fear you know very well why I am here." Edwin glared at her as she came to stand before him. He turned to the butler and again demanded, "Fetch your lord."

"There is no need for that Norman, I shall see to Lord Edwin myself."

"You shall not," Lord Edwin hissed. "I shall have nothing to do with you. My words are for your father's ears and your father's ears alone."

Lady Susan had the decency to at least look shocked.

"Please, Lord Edwin, I must insist that my father is not disturbed," Lady Susan said even as the butler began to make his way up the stairs.

"I do not care a fig for what you insist." Edwin glared back at her. "I have no time for you."

"What is this about?" Lady Susan asked. "Surely you can't be here on behalf of that wretched woman, Miss Helena?"

Edwin suddenly felt as though he might strike her had she been a gentleman.

He was about to say something he might regret when the lord of the house suddenly appeared as his daughter had at the top of the

staircase.

"Lord Edwin, what is the meaning of this?" Lord Tompkins demanded as he quickly descended the stairs.

"I am here to demand justice be done," Edwin explained and his tone was much harsher than he would have liked. "Your daughter has caused a great deal of trouble and an innocent woman languishes in Marshalsea for it."

"I witnessed the awful business at Sir Joshua Makepeace's party," Lord Tompkins sighed. "Though I am unsure as to why you believe my daughter caused it?"

"How else do you explain the bracelet coming into my possession?" Edwin asked. "I know you do not believe that Miss Helena placed it there. You are not so foolish a man as to think that."

The moment he saw doubt in Lord Tompkins' eyes he knew that the lord was questioning the events that had happened the night before.

"I can assure you that it was your own daughter, Lady Susan, who planted the bracelet in my pocket for the bailiffs to find," he continued so as not to allow Lady Susan to talk her way out of it.

"Lady Susan, is this true?" Lord Tompkins asked. He turned his tired eyes on his daughter then and Edwin watched the colour drain from her face.

She was silent for a moment until Lord Edwin added, "I knew you were malicious but I had no idea you were so hateful towards Miss Helena. It's time you told the truth."

"Is it true?" Lord Tompkins repeated. The higher tone of his voice told Edwin that he had already guessed the answer.

"It is." Lady Susan sighed and she bowed her head in shame.

"Lord Edwin, what would you have her do?" Lord Tompkins asked.

"I would have her return to Marshalsea with me to retract all of her statements," Edwin insisted.

Lady Susan's head snapped up then. "At this hour?"

Edwin resisted the urge to scold her like a naughty child and instead said, "If you do not, I shall see to it that every gentleman in the country knows of your vile nature. You shall never make a good marriage for as long as I am around to be sure that you don't."

"If you do not do as he has requested then you shall be no daughter of mine," Lord Tompkins added to the threat then. "You have brought shame upon this family."

Lady Susan looked close to tears. She was silent then, as though weighing her options.

"Might you at least permit me to change?" she asked, looking at them both hopefully.

"We shall allow it," Lord Tompkins replied, though Edwin would have dragged her kicking and screaming in her nightgown for all he cared.

Chapter 23

The night wore on until Miss Helena could bear it no longer. She had lain on the straw mattress for long enough, chasing sleep that would never come to her.

The sounds of the other prisoners coming from the darkness was as loud as a church choir.

Knowing that she would get no rest, she pushed herself to her feet and began to pace the small cell.

Lord Edwin promised, she reminded herself, this won't be forever.

She was beginning to fear that she might walk a hole into her shoes when she heard the sound of footsteps coming down the corridor.

Hope blossomed inside her as she wondered whether Lord Edwin may have returned with good news.

It wasn't until the bailiff opened up her cell that the same hope was replaced with terror.

There was a stern, almost angry look upon his face as he pushed open the door. Helena wasn't sure whether it was the shadows cast by the

lamplight or whether she may have done something terribly wrong.

"Miss Helena Ashby, you are to come with me now," he told her with a deep sigh.

"Where am I to be taken?" Helena asked, and she could hear the trembling in her own voice. So much for not showing any weakness. A night in the cells without food or water had left her shaking and disoriented.

"You will see," the bailiff replied with a scowl. "The master wishes to see you."

The master? Helena thought.

In all the time her father had been incarcerated she had never once seen or heard of a master. Perhaps it was some kind of code word for something, but she couldn't for the life of her imagine what it was.

Her heart hammered as she was led from the cell, though she was more than a little relieved that she was not shackled. That had to be a good sign.

The bailiff walked close behind her, his keys jangling on the chain at his waist. The sound grated on Helena even more than the sounds of the sleeping prisoners had.

He led her to the end of the corridor and unlocked the iron gate

before gesturing her through.

Once on the other side, she waited for the bailiff to lock the gate again before she followed him up the stairs.

The lump that had formed in her throat the night before only hardened as the bailiff paused in front of a large wooden door with a placard carved with the words 'prison manager'.

He reached up and rapped his knuckles heavily on the wood.

"Come in!" A grisly voice sounded from the other side.

Though the bailiff pushed open the door he did not enter. Instead, he gestured Helena inside.

She peered through the doorway for a moment before finally stepping inside.

The room was bathed with natural light, the sunlight caressing her face as she stepped into it.

Sat at an old, time-beaten desk was a slender man with metal-rimmed spectacles that hung off his sharp nose. The beady eyes behind them reminded Helena of a bird of prey and she was instantly scared.

"Miss Helena Ashby?" he asked as he rose from his seat and came to stand before her.

Helena had to crane her neck to look up at him and the way he loomed over her caused her heart to stop.

"Yes sir?" She gulped down her fear and squared her shoulders in an attempt to stop her from showing any weakness.

"I am Mr Mathews, the manager of Marshalsea Prison," he announced. "And when I heard of your story, I knew that I must personally apologise for your treatment."

My story? Helena mused, why on earth would he apologise to me?

"I am unsure as to what you mean," she admitted.

"My dear, you have been gravely mistreated these past few days," Mr Mathews explained and although his face was grave it was not unkind. "I wish to apologise on behalf of all concerned for your wrongful incarceration."

Helena's head began to spin. This had to be some kind of trick. Why was he filling her with such hope only to have her dragged back down into the pits of hell?

"Miss Helena, a lady of the highest standing arrived this morning to retract her statements against you," Mr Mathews explained when she

did not speak. "It appears that you have made some enemies over the years who would do you harm."

A lady? He couldn't possibly be talking about Lady Susan, Helena thought. Yet who else could it have been?

"Miss Helena Ashby, you are hereby freed of all the charges against you," Mr Mathews explained. "And I would be honoured to escort you to the gates myself."

This had to be a trick, some way of working her down in order to make her confess her crimes so that they might lock her up and throw away the key forever.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir." Helena shook her head. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She wouldn't allow herself to.

"Please come with me," Mr Mathews insisted as he began to walk to the door and when he pushed it open she found that the bailiff was gone from the corridor.

Taking a deep breath, she began to follow him as he had asked.

"I must warn you, Miss Helena, that you find yourself in a very uncertain position in society," Mr Mathews sighed as they wandered down the hall towards the main yard. "You would do well to keep your friends close."

By friends, she knew that he must mean Lord Edwin. Had the two men spoken?

When they arrived at the yard two guards were waiting by the gates. Their faces were as stern as the rest of the prison workers and they looked as though they wished to be anywhere else but here. Helena couldn't blame them. She couldn't imagine that the Marshalsea was a pleasant place to work.

"Open the gates," Mr Mathews insisted and the two guards set to it.

When Mr Mathews turned back to her there was a thin yet friendly smile upon his face. "Miss Helena Ashby you are free to go."

Helena's head spun with possibilities, though not all of them good. Was this a trick? Would he call the guards to arrest her as soon as she stepped out onto the street?

"Please go, Miss Helena," Mr Mathews insisted. "I do so wish never to see you grace our halls again."

Helena knew that there was nothing she could do but take the risk. He was practically forcing her out of the door.

With another quick breath, she began to walk, feeling as though the weight of the world was upon her shoulders.

Yet the moment she stepped out of the shadow of the gatehouse her

heart finally began to beat again.

There, standing on the sidewalk, looking as though he hadn't slept a wink, was Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins. His hair was dishevelled and there were dark circles beneath his eyes but still, Helena thought he was as handsome as the day she had first laid eyes upon him.

"My love!" He greeted her with a beaming smile as the gates ground shut behind her.

"Edwin, what is going on?" she asked, trembling with relief as the weight was finally lifted from her shoulders.

"I told you I would see you freed and I have kept my promise," he told her as he stepped forwards so close that she wondered if he might kiss her.

"How?" She barely dared to breathe the word as she gazed up into his blue-brown eyes.

"Lady Susan Tompkins was forced to retract her statements once her father knew the truth of the matter," Lord Edwin explained and Helena suddenly felt so shaky that she might have fallen to her knees had it not been for the way he reached out to take hold of her arms. "You are free, my love, and all scandal has been washed from your name."

Helena feared that no amount of soap and water would free her of the scandal her father had caused, but at least now she would not be seen as a thief.

"Come, my dear," Lord Edwin gripped hold of her hand then and began to guide her away from the gates. "Let us get you home."

Helena stopped in her tracks, the lump forming again in her throat.

"I...I cannot go back to Haddington Hall," she protested. The mere thought threatened to bring her to her knees.

"My dear, Haddington Hall is no longer your home," Lord Edwin assured her. "You need never see that place again."

If Haddington Hall was not her home, then where was he taking her?

As though he had seen the question on her face, Lord Edwin began to smile. "You belong with me now. I have already sent word back to my estate to have guest quarters made up for you until we are married."

Tears of relief and happiness sprang into Helena's eyes then and she realised that for once in her life all was right with the world.

Chapter 24

Lord Edwin left Miss Helena in the drawing-room the moment he heard of his visitors' arrival. He could not thank his maid enough for keeping their names from Miss Helena's ears as he swept from the room to find Lord Tompkins and his daughter standing in the hallway of his home.

"Lord Tompkins," he greeted the gentleman with a bow of his head before turning a stern glare on the daughter. "Lady Susan."

"Please forgive the intrusion, Lord Edwin," Lord Tompkins sighed. "I am sure that you wish to return to normalcy but I fear that there is something to be done first."

"What might that be?" Lord Edwin asked with a raised eyebrow.

"My daughter wishes to see Miss Helena," Lord Tompkins said and Edwin was about to protest when he added, "She wishes to give her apologies in person."

The look on Lady Susan's face told Edwin that it was not entirely her idea and yet he couldn't bring himself to turn her away. The last thing he wanted was to deny his bride-to-be something that might offer her comfort after all that had happened to her.

"Then you must follow me, Lady Susan," Edwin told the woman before

he turned to his maid, who stood a little way off with her hands clasped before her, ready to move at the drop of a hat. "Mrs Stuart, please escort Lord Tompkins to the library and have tea brought up from the kitchen."

"Of course, my lord." The woman gave a curt bow of her head before gesturing for the other gentleman to follow her.

"Lady Susan, please kindly follow me." Edwin gestured the lady to follow him and began to make his way back to the drawing-room.

Upon entering he found Miss Helena perched in the window seat with a book in her hand, as she had been when he had left.

"Helena, there is someone here to see you," he told her as he pulled back the door to reveal Lady Susan.

For just a moment there was a look of horror on Miss Helena's beautifully pale face. Then just as quickly as it had appeared it was gone again.

She placed the book face down on the seat so as not to lose her page and pushed herself to her feet.

"Lady Susan," she greeted the other woman as politely as she would a friend although Edwin could see the way her hands trembled as she stroked them down the front of her new dress.

"Miss Helena." Lady Susan appeared to speak through gritted teeth and Edwin knew it had taken all she had to come here.

"What might I do for you?" Miss Helena asked in a guarded tone.

"Perhaps I should leave you to it?" Edwin suggested and he watched Miss Helena's face pale.

"No, Lord Edwin, you must hear this also," Lady Susan insisted.

Edwin simply nodded and waited for her to continue.

"Miss Helena, I was wrong to falsely accuse you," Lady Susan explained. "I brought shame on my family in doing so and I can only hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me."

Edwin could tell that it was taking Lady Susan all she had to say the words and still he could not find it in his heart to forgive her for all she had done to Miss Helena.

"I am ashamed of the way I have treated you over the years," Lady Susan continued when neither of them spoke. "Do you think you might ever be able to forgive me?"

A conflicted expression took over Miss Helena's face then and for a moment Edwin believed she might deny the woman's request.

"Lady Susan, you and your father were kind enough to offer me a home when I had none," Miss Helena said and at that moment Edwin was prouder than he had ever been. "I do not wish for us to have all this hanging over our heads for the rest of our days and so I shall accept your apology."

Edwin was both relieved and slightly disappointed that she had allowed Lady Susan off so lightly.

Then she added, "Though we shall never be friends I do like to think that we could be civil to one and other, especially as I am to be Lord Edwin's wife and we shall most likely be seeing a lot of each other."

Edwin didn't miss the way that Lady Susan squirmed at her remark and he knew at that moment that Miss Helena would torture her far more with forgiveness than more hatred.

"Will you stop for tea?" Miss Helena asked with a friendly smile though it was obvious to Edwin that she'd had the same thought as he had.

"No, no," Lady Susan shook her head and clasped her hands before her. "I really must be going."

"I shall take you to your father then," Edwin offered, and he gave Miss Helena one final smile as he led Lady Susan from the room.

That evening as Lord Edwin sat in the dining room with Miss Helena and Lady Claire, he couldn't help but think how much fresher the air was after Lady Susan's awkward apology. The weight seemed to have been lifted from Miss Helena's shoulders and she was smiling much more freely than before.

As he watched her, he couldn't help but admire her. For the life of him, he couldn't understand how a woman could be so beautiful. With every stroke of her spoon into her soup bowl, she seemed to glow further, recovering some of the health that had been stolen from her during the scandal that surrounded her.

Now, lifted from beneath the weight, she was as radiant as the day Edwin had found her at Haddington Hall. Having changed for dinner she was wearing a pale peach dress that brought out the rosiness of her cheeks and the rosebud of her plump lips, lips he so longed to kiss.

He thought of how long it would be before he could do so without fear of risking another scandal. Once they were wed, he could kiss her as much as he liked, if she was to permit him. Oh, how he hoped that she would for he couldn't bear to think of a day without kissing her, of a day without showing her his affections.

"Are you well, cousin" Lady Claire spoke up and he suddenly realised that he had been staring at Miss Helena for far too long.

He quickly averted his gaze as Miss Helena turned her attention towards him, drawn by Lady Claire's words.

"Yes, Claire," he responded even as he smiled down sheepishly at the

bowl of pea soup before him. "I was just thinking how much has changed these past few months."

"I cannot blame you," Lady Claire smiled back at him. "There was a time when I feared all hope was lost for you."

Edwin agreed with her. He had been so terribly worried that he would never find a woman like Miss Helena, a woman who would anchor him and keep him from making mistakes.

"I feared the same," he admitted and when he looked up again to find Miss Helena watching him, he couldn't help but reach out to place his hand on hers.

"I thank God daily for giving you the wisdom to stay away from that wicked woman," Lady Claire continued and the three of them all knew she was talking about Lady Susan. Her name never needed to be uttered to know who she meant.

"We can forget all of that now," Edwin assured her. He remembered how stupid he had been to ever allow himself to be talked into courting Lady Susan. For one brief moment, he allowed himself to imagine what it might be like to be married to her and he couldn't help but quiver with disgust.

"I do not know what I would have done had I not had Helena to open my eyes," Edwin sighed. Perhaps if she had never existed he might never have known how malicious Lord Tompkins' daughter could be until it was too late.

"I fear you give me too much credit, Edwin." Helena sighed as she placed her spoon in her bowl and placed her free hand on top of his.

Their gazes met and he couldn't help but mirror the bright smile she offered him.

"And I fear he does not give you enough," Lady Claire chuckled then. "He would be lost to us all if not for you."

Again Edwin, knew that she was right. There was not another woman like Miss Helena in all of the country. In fact, he wondered whether there might be another like her in all of the world.

"Helena, you must take your walk down the aisle as soon as possible," Lady Claire insisted even as she lifted her wine glass to her lips and took a gracious sip.

"What is the rush?" Edwin asked in an attempt to make himself look less impatient upon the matter.

"Well, if Helena hopes to take up Countess Pirelli on her offer, then she must be wed before she goes," Lady Claire pointed out. "We cannot have her swanning all over Europe without a husband."

Edwin and Miss Helena both chuckled at that.

"I do believe she is right Edwin," Helena told him. "That is if you shall allow me to travel?"

Edwin was taken aback by that. He had never been one to agree on the usual nature of gentlemen who believed they owned their wives and all that they were allowed to do and think.

He squeezed her hand gently and felt the one atop his own squeeze back in return.

"I shall support you in whatever you decide to do," he vowed. "But I do have one condition."

Miss Helena's eyes lit up with interest then and she smiled back at him. "Anything."

"You must allow me to join you," he told her. "After all we cannot have you swanning off alone."

He shot Lady Claire a playful glance before returning his attention to his bride-to-be.

"I was hoping you would say that," she nodded. "I would be glad of the company."

"Then it is settled!" Lady Claire clapped her hands together in delight. "You shall be married as soon as possible."

"But there is so much to do," Miss Helena protested. "We couldn't possibly rush things."

"There is no need to rush when you have the most excellent wedding planner who ever lived," Lady Claire insisted, and both Edwin and Miss Helena turned to look at her in confusion.

"We have not hired a wedding planner," Edwin pointed out.

"And you never shall!" Lady Claire scoffed. "I have been planning my own wedding ever since I can remember. I shall help Miss Helena make all the arrangements."

"I would be very grateful to know that Helena was not burdened with the task alone," Edwin admitted.

"What do you think to thirty days from now?" Lady Claire asked before insisting, "that shall give us plenty of time to get everything straightened out."

"So soon?" Miss Helena gasped. "I had thought it would take much longer to plan a wedding than that."

"On the contrary," Lady Claire shook her head. "If I had my way the two of you would be married by the end of the week!"

"Then I suppose thirty days is quite enough time," Edwin chuckled. "What do you say, my darling? Shall we be married at the beginning

of next month?"

"I believe we shall." Miss Helena smiled sweetly and Edwin felt his heart begin to swell at the mere thought of it.

"Then I shall go to the church first thing in the morning to speak with the vicar," Edwin assured them. "The rest shall be up to you."

For the rest of the evening, it seemed to be all the ladies could talk about. Lady Claire grew more and more excited, discussing gowns and flowers and the guest list, while Miss Helena sat quietly, happy to allow her to talk of such things.

Edwin leaned back in his seat and enjoyed the meal before them, listening to the two of them talk back and forth, realising that life would be much simpler now that he had found himself a bride.

Chapter 25

The next morning as Miss Helena swept down the stairs for breakfast she was shocked to find Lady Claire waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase.

"Helena! It is about time you were from your bed," Lady Claire laughed. "We have much to do and much to discuss."

She gestured behind her and for the first time, Helena noticed the woman who was standing in the hallway with trunks, rails and boxes of portfolios all around her.

"Helena, this is Mrs Glover. She will be fitting you for your wedding dress this morning," Lady Claire announced.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Helena." The woman greeted her even as she stepped further into the hallway.

She was a middle-aged woman, professional in both manner and attire with a navy-blue dress and pins already pressed into the edges of her apron as though she was simply waiting to get her hands on Helena.

"I shall have Mr Dixon and the other servants take everything into the drawing-room," Lady Claire explained even as she began to disappear down the hall to call for the butler.

"I am at a loss as to how you came so quickly," Helena admitted to the dressmaker once Lady Claire was gone.

"I received a letter a few days ago from Lady Claire to tell me that my services would be needed shortly," the woman explained. "And another came last night to tell me that I should come this morning."

Helena couldn't help but laugh. Lady Claire must have sent the letter almost as soon as she had left the dining room.

"I had thought that I would be fitting Lady Claire for a dress," the woman admitted. "Though I can see you shall make as beautiful a bride as she."

Helena blushed at the woman's compliment. Not for the first time she felt a fresh wave of shock at the mention of her being a bride. She wondered whether she might ever grow used to it. Even after the wedding, she wondered whether it would ever feel normal.

For so long she had resigned herself to simply being a lady's companion. She had thought that she would forever watch those around her getting married, never to experience it for herself.

And yet here she was, about to be fitted for the dress that she would walk down the aisle in to meet the handsome man who had asked her to be his wife.

When she closed her eyes, she could only imagine what Edwin might

look like as he saw her for the first time, his eyes lit up in happiness, and she knew that no matter what else she did she had to be sure that she looked perfect. She couldn't very well go into her new life as his wife on half measures.

(Twenty-nine days later.)

Helena stood before the mirror admiring her wedding dress for the very last time before walking down the aisle. The long flowing white silk hugged every inch of her body. The lace decoration of the sleeves matched the high neckline that was held in place by a pearl brooch given to her by Lady Claire. She lifted her hand to caress the pearls for a moment and couldn't help but smile. For the first time in her life, she felt like a proper lady and soon she would be.

"You look beautiful Miss Helena," Katherine, the woman Lady Claire had insisted upon hiring as her lady's maid, stood a little way off to admire her.

"Thank you, Katherine," Helena replied.

Just then the sound of knocking caused them both to jump and Katherine hurried to the door to open it.

Lady Claire swept in wearing the finest peach dress that Mrs Glover had fitted for her to be Helena's bridesmaid.

"How are we doing in here?" she asked as soon as she entered. When she caught sight of Helena she stopped in her tracks and her mouth practically dropped open in astonishment. "Oh, Helena! You look absolutely breathtaking!" she exclaimed.

"Thank you," Helena smiled back even as her cheeks began to blush.

"Would you permit Countess Pirelli to see you?" Lady Claire asked. "She has a gift she would like you to wear."

Helena couldn't see why not and so she nodded.

Katherine opened the door again and the countess stepped in. She was adorned in a purple gown decorated with diamonds around her neck and in the pins that held up her hair.

"Miss Helena, you look marvellous," Lady Isabelle told her as she entered the room carrying a rectangular jewellery box. "I do hope you will forgive me for holding you up but I had heard you were in need of something new and blue."

"I had heard that too." Lady Claire chuckled and Helena could only guess that the two ladies had been discussing it previously.

Lady Isabelle stepped forwards and placed the box on the dressing table beside Helena.

"This is a small token of my thanks for what you have promised to do for me," Lady Isabelle explained as she stepped back.

In the days before the wedding, Helena had discussed a plan she and Edwin had formulated to restore Countess Pirelli's estate to her by way of using her payments from the events the lady had set up for her all across Europe. At first, the countess had seemed too proud to accept but it appeared she had come to terms with it.

"You didn't have to do that," Helena protested. She had already decided that Countess Pirelli would not be the only one to benefit from her singing. She and Edwin had agreed they had funds enough to donate all she earned to young women and children faced with the same troubles she'd had growing up. She was more than pleased to have a husband who supported her in her venture, knowing that she couldn't have done it without him.

"Open it!" Lady Claire insisted.

Helena stepped up to the dressing table and held her breath as she pulled open the box.

Her heart stopped when she saw the delicate tiara sat on a velvet cushion. The sapphire gemstones glistened in the morning light, the perfect shade of blue.

"I had it commissioned as soon as Lady Claire told me that you were in need of something," Countess Pirelli explained. "It is the only one of its kind and it's all yours."

Surely she couldn't mean that? This was much too beautiful a gift for her.

A large part of Helena wanted to refuse it but she knew it would be impolite after Countess Pirelli had gone to so much trouble to acquire it.

"It will hold your veil in place perfectly," Lady Claire pointed out and Helena had to admit that she was right.

"Let me help you put it on," Countess Pirelli offered and before Helena could protest that Katherine would help her, the lady had lifted the tiara.

"Katherine, fetch the veil would you?" Lady Claire insisted and the maid and lady began to work together to secure the veil and tiara upon Helena's head.

Now when Helena looked in the mirror she could only feel like a princess. The sapphires that dazzled upon her head were more beautiful than anything she had ever seen before when Katherine draped the front of her veil back over her head so that she could see.

"I do believe that you are now ready to be wed!" Lady Claire almost squealed with excitement and Helena felt the nerves setting in.

Her stomach was alive with butterflies as she imagined Edwin, who was already likely to be waiting for her at the church.

"There is someone awaiting you downstairs to escort you," Lady Claire explained and Helena turned to her with interest.

"Who?" she asked.

"You will see," Lady Claire responded, as though not ready to give up the surprise.

"Katherine, how are you going to get to the church?" Lady Claire asked the maid even as Katherine began to pick up the train of Helena's gown.

"I shall be travelling with the other servants in the wagon behind the carriages, Lady Claire," Katherine explained. "Do not fret."

Satisfied with her answer Lady Claire began to lead the way from the bedroom and down the hall to the staircase.

Helena walked as swiftly as she dared in her wedding shoes and as she came to the bottom of the staircase a gentleman came into view from the drawing-room.

"Lord Yarmouth!" Helena exclaimed in surprise. Her mother's cousin was dressed in a fine morning suit with a peach flower sitting in the top buttonhole beside his pocket handkerchief.

"Miss Helena! You are the image of your mother," Lord Yarmouth

smiled. "Absolutely beautiful."

Helena's cheeks blushed cherry red beneath the fine layer of makeup that Katherine had applied for her.

"I do believe that Lord Yarmouth has a request to make," Lady Claire explained as she picked up a bouquet of white roses from the table beside the front door.

"Miss Helena Ashby, I know that the connection between our families has been frayed as of late but I would like to honour my late cousin and your father. Would you do me the honour of allowing me to walk you down the aisle in his place?"

Helena felt tears begin to prick the corners of her eyes and she nodded quickly.

"I would be very grateful for you to," she admitted. The worry of having nobody to walk her down the aisle had been playing on her mind for a while now.

"We should be getting to the church. They will be waiting for us," Lady Claire insisted as she handed Helena the bouquet and then picked up her own smaller one. "The flower girls have already gone ahead."

Helena smiled as she thought of Edwin's cousins, young girls who had been picked to shower the aisle with rose petals, and she wondered whether she might have a couple of beautiful little girls of her own soon.

Lord Yarmouth offered Helena his arm and began to escort her through the front door to the carriages that were waiting beyond.

A crowd of villagers had turned out to wave and applaud Helena as she approached the church. They called good wishes and threw flowers before the horses' hooves to bless the wedding that was about to take place.

"Are you ready, Miss Helena?" Lord Yarmouth asked as the carriage drew to a halt at the gate of the church.

"As ready as I shall ever be," she admitted. She had begun to shake with nerves, terrified that she might damage her bouquet if it got any worse.

"This is the best day of your life," Lord Yarmouth assured her. "Both of your parents would be very proud."

A single tear rolled down Helena's cheek, though it was not a tear of sadness but of happiness at his words. He couldn't have said anything more comforting to her at that moment.

Lord Yarmouth climbed out of the carriage and one of the valets offered up a hand to help her out after him.

Lady Claire waited close by alone with the two flower girls, who were dressed in the same peach material. The white bows around their waists matched the white rose petals that were sitting in their wicker baskets.

"Doesn't she look beautiful, girls?" Lady Claire asked them as Lord Yarmouth escorted her up the path to join them.

"She looks like an angel," the eldest of the two girls said sweetly.

"Thank you, Miss Octavia," Helena responded.

"Now girls, you know what to do," Lady Claire told them and the two girls nodded.

Miss Octavia gave her little sister a gentle nudge and the two of them began to lead the rest of the party into the church. The sound of the grand organ began to play and Helena's heart began to race as Lord Yarmouth led her in behind Lady Claire.

As the second double doors were pulled open, Helena found herself face-to-face with all their guests. Many of the faces she had never seen before. Others were familiar though she could never have named them. Closest to the front were the faces of those she knew. Countess Pirelli had joined Lady Winifred and several other ladies. Close by was Lord Tompkins and several other noblemen she'd had the pleasure of meeting. Yet Helena was unable to miss the fact that she did not see his daughter among the crowd.

A small sliver of disappointment crept into her stomach at the realisation. She had hoped that Lady Susan might attend after offering up her apologies.

As she drew closer and closer to the end of the aisle everything was replaced with admiration and excitement. Lord Edwin Martin-Atkins awaited her looking every bit as magnificent as he ever had.

All fear and doubt evaporated in an instant when he turned to her with a bright smile.

Lord Yarmouth offered him his hand and the two gentlemen shared a quick handshake before the older gentleman gave Helena a brief smile and took his seat on the front row behind her.

Helena struggled to take her eyes off Lord Edwin as the vicar began to read from the leather-bound book in his hands.

"You are breathtaking," Lord Edwin whispered.

At that moment Helena knew that everything that had come before was worth it. After the scandals, and the stresses of wedding planning, everything had come to an end. She was, more than ever, ready to begin a new life as Lady Helena Martin-Atkins.

THE END

*Can't get enough of Helena and Edwin? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

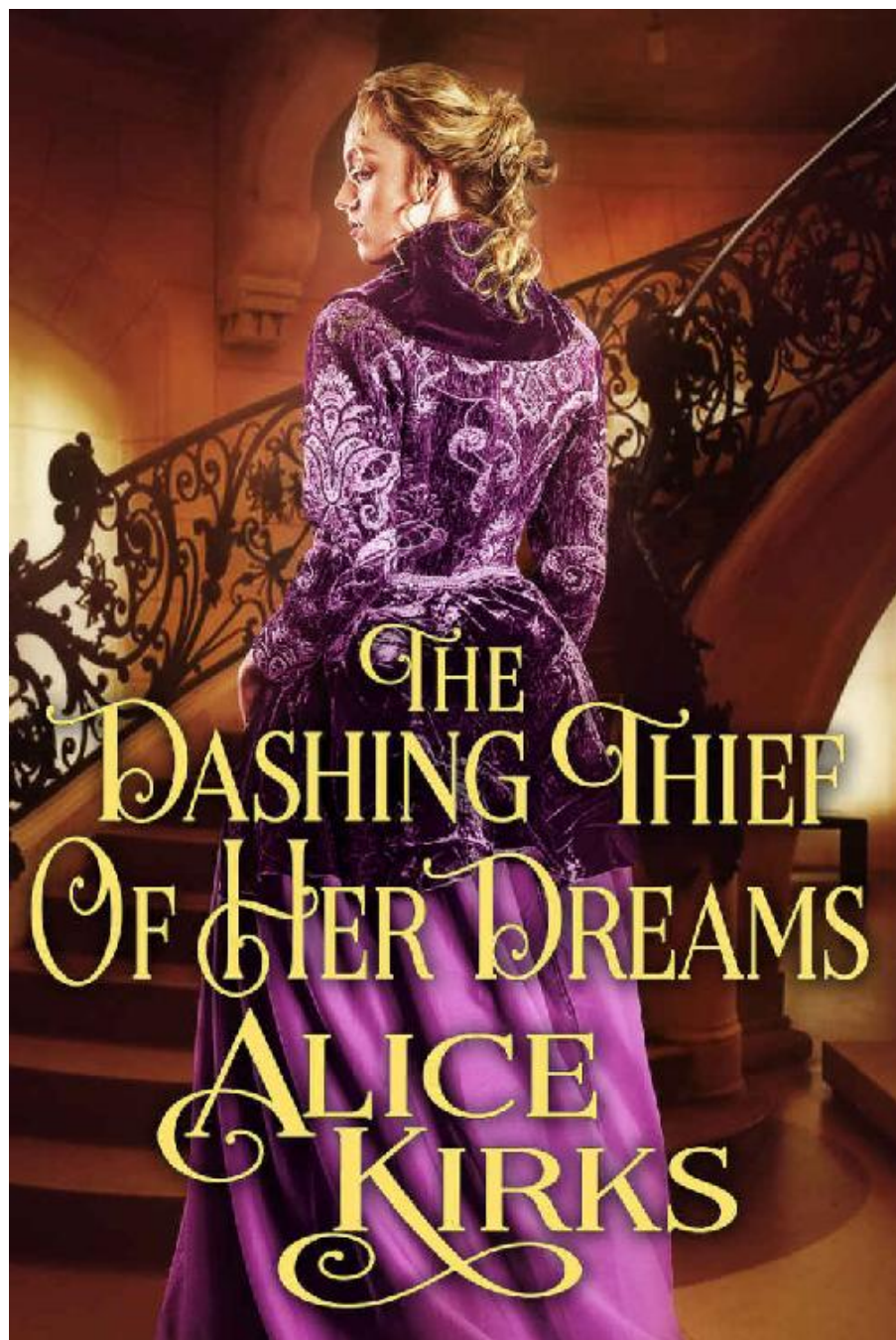
*What grand event will be held at the ballroom of Countess Pirelli's
mansion?*

*What could be the secret that Helena will decide to reveal to her beloved
husband?*

What surprise will await Helena at her last performance in Italy?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
<http://alicekirks.com/helena>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**The Dashing Thief of Her Dreams**”, my Amazon Best-
Selling novel!)*



The Dashing Thief of Her Dreams

Introduction

Lady Bridget Stanhope doesn't dream of meeting her fairytale prince like every other girl of her age. The perfect suitor for her is a more daring and brave gentleman rather than a polite and socially acceptable one. When one night she stumbles across a masked man who breaks into her house, Bridget immediately falls under the spell of his eyes and makes it her goal to meet him again.

But her plans go askew when a charming lord steals her mind, and the young lady finds herself thrown into a great dilemma. Will Bridget find a way to unfold her complicated feelings? In the end, will she choose the charming nobleman or the daredevil thief?

Lord Geoffrey Nott wants to spend his life traipsing around the globe, while the idea of marriage has always repelled him. But the moment he lays eyes on Bridget, his life takes an unexpected turn. After spending more time with her, Geoffrey reconsiders the idea of marriage, as he realizes that he is hopelessly falling in love with her. However, no matter how happy he feels next to her, Geoffrey has a profound secret, and he is awfully scared that when Bridget discovers the truth, she will detest him once and for all. Will he convince Bridget that sometimes things are not always what they seem? Will he find happiness with the only woman he has ever fallen in love?

It seems like Bridget and Geoffrey are made for each other. But everything crashes down when Geoffrey's malicious brother sets his mind on stealing everything that Geoffrey has, including his beautiful bride. Will the couple find a true soul mate in one another, despite all odds? Will they escape from an envious man, or will their only chance at happiness fall through?

Chapter 1

The rain was absolutely pounding on the windows of the sitting room at Highcourt House. The roar of the water outside was so deafening that the ladies seated on the couches, chaises and settees inside the room could barely make out what the author who was seated near the fireplace was saying.

“I do apologise for interrupting,” Lady Deborah Stanhope called from her position near the back of the room. The author, a man named George Silas, looked up from his parchment and adjusted his spectacles.

“Do you have a compliment you would like to pay me, young madam?” Mr. Silas asked. Deborah looked to her sister, Lady Bridget Stanhope, with wide eyes and a disgusted look on her face. Bridget tried to control her laughter but a small titter escaped her cherry lips. Deborah turned back to the author.

“I would love to,” Deborah began, reaching out and grasping her sister’s hand tightly to stop her from laughing, “but right now I can hardly hear a word of your, ahem, enlightened writing. Could you please speak up?” The gentleman looked taken aback until Lady Deborah and Lady Bridget’s aunt, Lady Eliza, gave him a look that told him they were correct. Mr. Silas cleared his throat and projected much louder this time, saying,

“THE EARLY AFTERNOON SUN DANCED ACROSS THE FLOORBOARDS IN THE EAST ROOM, MUCH LIKE MY HEART DANCED FOR LADY EDNA WHEN I FIRST GAZED UPON HER.” Lady Deborah was the one who had to contain her laughter this time, but Lady Bridget was not much help on the matter. Lady Eliza shot the young women a look that made them cease their silliness

immediately, but they were both relieved to have silently agreed that Mr. Silas was a truly terrible author.

While the room was filled almost to bursting with fine young ladies, Ladies Bridget and Deborah Stanhope were undeniably the two finest in the room. They were the daughters of Lord Alymer Stanhope, a viscount, and lived on a luxurious estate on the edge of Surrey. Lady Deborah, who was twenty-two, was wearing a dress that was light green in colour, and had a dark green shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She was the kind of woman who was never truly too cold or too warm, but who always had a complaint about the temperature.

She had auburn hair that was done today in a chignon and had pretty little curls that coiled pleasantly and hung happily about her face. She was blessed with naturally curly hair that did not require much encouragement from the iron to cooperate with whatever hairstyle she wished her hair to be in. She was quite tall; taller, in fact, than many of the men who wished to be her suitors. She had a pleasantly round face and hazel eyes that always seemed to catch details that others missed.

Lady Bridget, on the other hand, had long, thick, straight blonde hair that required a great deal of encouragement to behave itself in hairstyles. She was a year younger than her sister and a few inches shorter: a physical detail that Lady Deborah was very jealous of. She was slight and elegant, with a broad face, a thin mouth, and hooded green eyes that resembled emeralds in the sunlight.

She was a classic beauty who wasn't aware of it, as she spent much of her time cursing the minute details of her appearance that she felt were not perfect. There were throngs of men in town who would have given their entire estates to be matched with either of the Stanhope sisters, but they were each waiting for their own versions of a perfect husband.

Today, Lady Bridget wore a white gown that had a reddish hue to it with a delicate sparrow pattern running down it. She, unlike her sister, was always cold, and so wore a deep red spencer to go with her gown. She was beginning to become restless as Mr. Silas continued on with his story, and hoped that she might be rescued from her boredom by the next author very soon. There was little else in this world that Lady Bridget hated more than boredom, and right now, she was horribly bored.

“AND SO,” Mr. Silas continued, “I MUST MAKE LIKE THE SPRING RABBIT AND TAKE TO MY BURROW TO TEND TO MY LITTLE ONES, FOR UNTIL LADY EDNA RETURNS, MY LIFE SHALL BE MEANINGLESS OTHERWISE.” Mr. Silas closed his book, and Lady Bridget’s heart leapt so much at him being finished that she broke into wild applause. All of the other ladies in the room looked to her as though she had lost her sense of civility, and so she stopped.

When she did, all of the rest of the ladies politely clapped their hands, and Lady Eliza rose from her seat to address the room. While all the rest of the group was distracted by her aunt, Bridget seized the opportunity to quietly get up from her spot and take a few more cucumber sandwiches. She heard her sister clear her throat behind her and she looked back, expecting to see Deborah glaring at her. Instead, Deborah motioned to the sweets that lay on the same plate as the sandwiches and seemed to be asking Lady Bridget to bring her a couple of them back.

Bridget picked two of them off the plate and showed them to her sister, who returned the offer with a look that said, ‘do you really think that will sustain me?’ Bridget picked a third one off the plate, placed everything in her napkin and hurried back to her seat. When she sat down, she laid the napkin across both of their laps and the two began eating immediately. In hushed tones, Deborah whispered to Bridget, “Thank you, sister. But if you ever threaten to bring me such a small assortment of Aunt Eliza’s famous miniatures again, I shall have to make you sleep out in the garden!” Lady Bridget began giggling again, but quickly silenced herself in fear that her aunt would

glare at her again.

“Thank you for that stirring rendition of your work, ‘Lady Edna’s Reticule’, Mr. Silas. We appreciate your company on this rather dismal day.” Another round of polite applause rippled through the crowd and Mr. Silas bowed to the ladies and left the room. “For our next reading, Lady Jane Albion will read the first chapter from her book, ‘A Pirate’s Romance.’ Please join me in welcoming Lady Jane to the front!” At the mention of the title of the book, Bridget’s interest was piqued. A lady writer who had written a book about a romance between a pirate and a lady? This was Bridget’s dream come true!

The reason for Bridget’s excitement was as follows: when Bridget was a little girl, her mother had encouraged her daughters to read. Every night before bed, Lady Olivia would read the girls a story from her favourite books. They heard tales of dashing princes, damsels in distress, rough pirates who became the objects of a lady’s affection, and much more.

Before long, Bridget was dreaming of being swept off her feet by a highwayman or a dashing pirate, much to their mother’s delight and their father’s chagrin. Bridget’s father even went as far as to say that Lady Olivia indulged them far too much. He immediately regretted his words after she had passed away far too young, but could do nothing to take them back now. Instead, he tried to be patient as Bridget would talk to him about ideas for her stories she wanted to write, and adventures she wanted to go on.

A gorgeous older woman came to the front of the room with some parchment in her hand. She said nothing to the audience, but gave them all a warm smile as she was seated. She organised a few of the pages, took a deep breath, and was just about to begin when a loud clap of thunder interrupted her. The ladies in the room, Bridget and Deborah included, all gasped, but once they realised what the sound was a relieved laugh rippled through the crowd. Lady Jane shook her head and smiled.

“That is certainly one way to begin my reading,” she said. “Our tale begins on the night of October 13 in the Year of Our Lord 1701. I had taken to my room for the second night in a row, for my father was terribly vexed about a shipment of alcohol that had just been delivered by some able seamen...” As Lady Jane spoke, Bridget was transported to another realm.

Here, she was not Lady Bridget Stanhope of Surrey; she was Scarlett George, bar wench and unfortunate lover of the dread pirate Tomlinson. She loved to imagine herself as a lower-class working girl who was whisked away to a life of adventure by a dashing but dangerous young man. He promised her all the riches of the world, if only she would abandon her way of life and take to the seas with him for eternity.

Bridget hadn’t realised that she had been so completely and utterly taken with the story until she felt her sister’s hand on her shoulder a few minutes later. “Bridget?” Deborah asked her. “Are you quite alright?” Bridget snapped out of her daze, and looked to her sister to see what the matter was.

Deborah was looking at Bridget’s lap very strangely, and when Bridget looked down, she saw why. In her haze, she had picked apart the bread that held her cucumber sandwich together and now had only three buttery cucumbers sitting on the napkin in front of her. She smiled at her sister.

“Sorry. I got a little carried away listening to the story.” Bridget ate the few cucumbers and crumpled the remnants of the sandwich into her napkin. Deborah continued to look at her with an expression that seemed to say she didn’t understand her.

“The story that finished five minutes ago?” Bridget felt the blood rushing to her cheeks.

“Has it really been that long?” Bridget looked around the room and saw the rest of the ladies standing and talking to one another as servants came to bring them their outdoor clothes.

“Yes. I’ve been waiting patiently for you to finish daydreaming but I thought perhaps you might need some assistance this time.” Deborah smiled kindly at her sister, and Bridget immediately felt less embarrassed about having ‘dazed out’ as she had. She knew her sister understood where her love for fanciful stories had come from, and so didn’t need to take offense at any jests that she made about it.

“Thank you,” Bridget said simply but appreciatively. “Shall we go to the phaeton? I do wish that we had brought the carriage with the complete roof: I fear we shall get rather wet on the ride home.” Deborah looked out of the window in disappointment.

“The sky was crystal clear when we set out this afternoon,” she reminded her sister. “It truly is our fault, though: how dare we take the fine weather carriage on a fine weather day? What did we expect was going to happen?” Both ladies laughed, and as they did, Lady Eliza walked over to them.

“Did I hear correctly that you brought the phaeton this afternoon?” She asked her nieces. They both nodded, and Lady Eliza tut-tutted. “It is never a good idea to tempt the weather with such a bold decision,” she said in jest. “Why don’t you take my carriage home? I’ll send Mr. Reynolds in the phaeton tomorrow to come fetch it.” Bridget sighed with relief.

“Thank you ever so much, Aunt Eliza,” she said gratefully. “I’m not sure that my white gown would retain its opaque qualities if it were to meet with too much rain.” Lady Eliza gently swatted her niece with the fan she had in her hand, but leaned in to her and said, “But perhaps if that were the case, you’d be more likely to entice a man like Pirate Tomlinson as in the story...” Lady Eliza smiled daringly at Bridget, who looked back at her aunt with an open mouth.

“Aunt Eliza!” Deborah cried on her sister’s shocked behalf. “I never thought you’d make as improper as that!” But before any of them could continue to pretend to be offended, all three ladies dissolved into laughter. When they finally managed to catch their breath, Aunt Eliza became very serious.

“If you ever mention that jest to anyone whose company we are in tonight, I shall deny it outright. Return home safely, girls, and give my best to your father.” With that, Aunt Eliza turned away from the young women and was immediately drawn into another conversation with another lady. Bridget turned to her sister and smiled.

“Well. To the carriage, then?” Deborah gave her a relieved smile.

“To the carriage!”

Chapter 2

The rain continued to come down in sheets and made rivers along the windows of the carriage. The sky had given a few more rumbles as the women had dashed from their aunt's estate, but thankfully there were no bright and terrifying flashes of lightning. Deborah despised storms: she thought them to be a rude interruption in her otherwise pleasant life.

Bridget, on the other hand, should have liked to dance outdoors the moment any storm arrived: she found them utterly exciting. This was, of course, because any time great and thrilling events took place in a novel, they always came in the middle of a storm of some variety. Bridget seemed to be waiting for the storm that she was certain would bring her to the great exhilarating incident of her life.

As the carriage bounced along the bumpy path back to their estate, the sisters discussed what they had heard at that afternoon's salon of writers. "If I never have to hear another one of George Silas' passages, it will still be too soon!" Deborah said. Bridget was delighted that her sister felt the same way about the man's writing that she did.

"I agree; he was the least talented writer of the afternoon," Bridget smoothed out the skirt on her gown. Seeing how sheer the individual layers of fabric were upon closer inspection, she was very grateful to her aunt for lending them her carriage.

"And I suppose you were fond of the lady writer's tale of swashbuckling romance?" Deborah looked at her sister, unimpressed. Bridget nodded emphatically.

“Most certainly. You know how I adore fanciful stories of that nature,” Bridget was proud of herself for controlling her enthusiasm for the book. Had she been talking to her dearest friend, Lady Heather Edgewood, she could have gone on for hours about how remarkable the writing was, the way the author had written the story so engagingly, the incredible passion that was ignited between Scarlett and Pirate Tomlinson... but her sister didn’t share her adoration for such stories.

“I do,” Deborah said. “I know that mother passed on her great imagination to you and largely forgot to give any to me,” she joked, “but I do not understand what it is you see in these stories. You’ve told me time and time again that it is-”

“That I wished I could live a life that was as dangerous, daring and exciting as that book!” Bridget smiled widely as she let herself get carried away by her passions momentarily. Deborah, however, rolled her eyes.

“Yes, but why?” Deborah pressed her. She saw how her sister, in spite of the warm spencer she still had on, was rubbing her arms to try to stay warm in the damp day. Deborah took off her green shawl and wrapped it tightly around Bridget, who nodded to her in thanks. Bridget was consistently astounded by her sister’s ability to maintain an appropriate temperature, no matter the weather. “It is dreadfully cold today. As I was saying, the events that take place in these stories are so far beyond the realm of possibilities that they’re simply absurd. Scarlett would never abandon her father and his inn to go and live on a boat with a pirate! She’d likely die of scurvy or sea weariness, and her father would have to go into the poorhouse because he had no one to help him run the inn.” Deborah crossed her arms in front of her, as though her point was the final one to be made in the discussion and there would be no further discussion. Bridget sighed.

“Running away to spend the rest of your life with the man you love, is that really so far beyond the realm of possibilities? ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio-’” Bridget intended to continue her quote from Shakespeare, but her sister waved her off.

“Don’t start making yourself into a Hamlet, dear sister, or I’ll pull this carriage over and you can go join Ophelia in the stream.” The sisters chuckled at the thought of Bridget having to traverse the muddy roads to go anywhere today.

“I suppose I see your point,” Bridget relented. “But I believe that if I were given a chance to have the magical kind of life that Scarlett had, I would seize it in a moment. I intend to get the most out of life that I can, and the best way to do that is to seek adventure!” Bridget looked to her sister excitedly, but Deborah sighed and looked out of the window on her side of the carriage.

“If you were given the chance to live the kind of life that Scarlett did,” Deborah began, “you’d recoil in horror at the conditions on the boat, scream in fear at the kind of men you’d have to share your living space with, and be ill at the thought of having to rob someone of their riches, as pirates do.” Bridget did her best not to let what Deborah was saying bother her, but it was becoming difficult not to.

“No I wouldn’t,” Bridget protested. “I’d be the most feared female pirate... pirate-ess that the West Indies has ever seen!” Bridget mimed holding a sword in her hand and slashed it through the air in front of her sister. Deborah didn’t see her at first, but when she felt the carriage rocking even more than usual, she turned to Bridget, took hold of her arm and stopped her.

“Now you’re speaking of going to the West Indies, are you?” Deborah looked very unimpressed. “And how would you, someone who faints when it becomes too warm here in Surrey in the summer, deal with

the extreme, exhausting heat of the West Indies?" Bridget opened her mouth to protest, but couldn't think of anything to say in response. She did think that she wouldn't enjoy the heat that many of her adventures would take her on. Suddenly, she thought of something.

"I would become accustomed to it in no time," Bridget said proudly. "I only feel faint at the beginning of summer; by midsummer, I thrive in the warm conditions. See?" Deborah continued to look as though she did not believe what her sister was saying.

"Well then, dear sister, you can consider me quite convinced," Deborah said, putting up her hands in surrender. "You may run off with the next pirate who comes into town seeking a well-to-do wife. In fact, I believe I heard a rumor there's a pirate ship docking in Southampton tomorrow!" Bridget knew that her sister was only teasing her, but it truthfully did hurt that hardly anyone she knew shared her love for dreaming of adventures. At first, she hadn't wanted to admit the true reason why she loved these stories so, but she knew that if she didn't, Deborah would continue to think she was a child.

"I give in, Deborah," Bridget began. Her sister turned to her and looked interested for the first time during the whole carriage ride. "I will reveal to you the real reason why these stories are so near and dear to my heart, beyond the fact that they're similar to what mother used to read to us. It is because when I marry, I wish to find a man who enjoys adventures and all of the exciting things that life has to offer. Too many men in town are contented with the day to day here in Surrey. I want a man who isn't afraid to... seek out new lands in the hopes of seeing something he never imagined possible. I want a man of adventure to sweep me off my feet!" There was silence in the carriage for a few moments as Deborah looked blankly at her sister. Then, finally...Deborah laughed.

"Do you think you're going to find a man like that anywhere near home?" Deborah asked between chuckles. "Or rather, anywhere in

England? Our men don't want adventure or to seek excitement in life; they want to find a respectable wife, settle down and have many children. Anything beyond that is merely..." Deborah was about to finish her sentence when she looked at her sister's eyes.

They were beginning to fill with tears. Deborah desperately wanted to finish expressing her sentiment, but she knew that if she continued, she would only upset Bridget more. "I did not mean to upset you, dear sister. I was merely trying to keep your head here on earth with us instead of up in the clouds as it usually is." Bridget nodded and brushed away her sister's attempt at an apology with her hand.

"I well understand what you were attempting to do," Bridget explained, "and I am sorry that I allowed my emotions to overcome me. The problem is... the thought of 'settling down' with a man who is as boring as you describe him to be... is pure torture." Deborah very nearly scoffed at her sister's tendency towards the dramatic, but she instead chose to be understanding.

Bridget may have been her younger sister, and she may have been a thorn in her side many a time, but she was also her closest friend and confidante. She didn't want to make her feel any worse than she already had.

"My darling, I know that you shall find a man who is the perfect combination of stable and adventurous," Deborah said, putting her arm around Bridget and pulling her in close. Bridget leaned her head on her sister's shoulder and dried her tears with the handkerchief she had kept tucked up her sleeve. "He shall be handsome, daring, courageous, and adventurous in all of the right ways. But, I am also certain that he shall provide you with the style of life that you have become accustomed to living so that you do not have to suffer any of the less enjoyable aspects of an 'adventurous' life." Deborah kissed the top of her sister's head. "And should he not be or do any of those things, he will have me to answer to - understood?" This brought a laugh out of Bridget, and Deborah was relieved to hear it.

“I suppose you’re right,” Bridget relented. “I shall find a man who is a wonderful combination of all of those characteristics. But until that time...” Bridget pulled a few pieces of parchment from her reticule and held them up for her sister to see. Deborah seemed confused by the paper, so Bridget finished, “I shall enchant you with the tales of the great Georgina and her handsome highwayman, Walter!” Deborah looked unimpressed initially, but then she smiled at her sister.

“Fine, fine. We have only a short distance more to go to the estate, so I will allow you to read me a passage of your fanciful story.” Bridget looked delighted and launched into her reading of chapter one of a story she had written the day before.

Chapter 3

That night Bridget lay awake in her luxurious bed, unable to rest. She wasn't sure what was keeping her mind so entertained: the day had not brought such excitement that it should have warranted such a restless night. Regardless, she found herself staring at the fabric roof of her four-poster bed; her mind unwilling to allow rest to come.

After a time, Bridget decided she should give up and get up from her bed. When she pulled back the covers, however, she was hit with the chill of the room. She took an extra blanket from the wooden chest at the end of her bed and wrapped it around herself; there was no need to suffer through a sleepless night that was plagued by the cold. She slipped her feet into the dainty slippers that lay on the floor at the side of her bed and walked to look out of her large window.

When she gazed out at the lawn that stretched out before her, she felt herself flooded with calm. There was something about the way the moon was glowing tonight, combined with the rain that now fell softly upon the grass, which made Bridget feel very reassured. Watching the storm come to a close felt like discovering a fever had broken and relief was on the way. She put one of her hands up to the glass, held it there for a moment, then pulled it away.

Her handprint remained on the misty glass, and she imagined her lover's hand suddenly appearing on the glass as well. She chuckled to herself at that thought, however: she would be very surprised if anyone were to touch the outside of her window, for her bedroom was on the second floor of their estate.

Now feeling far calmer, Bridget walked back towards her bed. She was

certain now that the moment she laid her head on the pillow, she would drift off into a pleasant sleep. However, as she stood on the rug that lay right beside her bed, Bridget thought she heard something hit the floor in the hallway.

She looked towards her bedroom door, more curious than frightened. She was unsure of the time, but knew that there wouldn't be many servants walking the halls this late at night. When she heard no more coming from the hallway she shook her head, believing the noise to have been something she had made up.

As soon as she got under the covers again, however, Bridget heard heavy footsteps hurrying past her door. By now, her curiosity was piqued, and she knew that she wouldn't be getting back to sleep any time soon.

Bridget pulled back the covers and rose from the bed. She stood on the rug, frozen, for quite some time. She was listening to hear if the footsteps continued or ceased entirely. She thought perhaps they could have belonged to her father. He was a large enough man that his footfalls would have made that sound, but he wasn't one for getting out of bed at this late hour. Lord Alymer was a heavy sleeper and once he was resting, it was nearly impossible to rouse him from his slumber. Could it have been Lady Deborah?

Again, Bridget doubted that because her sister was not as heavy-footed as the person who had just walked past her door. Lady Deborah was also not one to come out of her room in the night, for she was rather afraid of the dark. What stuck in Bridget's mind was that something had to be amiss, and she was the only one in the house who could deal with it. If she wanted a life of adventure and daring then she had to be brave herself, didn't she?

Bridget took her candle from her bedside, lit it, and grabbed her night

coat. She tiptoed towards her door very quietly, still trying to hear if there were any other noises that followed the footsteps. When she heard nothing, she grasped the handle of the door and very gently pulled on it. Immediately, the door squeaked as it always did, and Bridget froze.

She knew she needed to get the door past a certain point and then it would be silent. But there was no way she would be able to get to that point without her door continuing to creak. It was a calculated risk, but Bridget decided to take it. She figured that whoever or whatever was in the house would think the creak was just a sound the house made. As slowly and as gently as she could, Bridget eased the door open and cringed as it continued to make its loud squeak. Finally, the door was silent, and Bridget felt her heartrate returning to normal.

When she'd made it out into the hallway, Bridget saw that all of their objects were in their usual positions. Her father's bookcase was undisturbed, the flowers Bridget had brought indoors the previous afternoon still sat in their vase, and Deborah's cherished statue of a cherub that Bridget thought was positively terrifying still stood by the end of the hallway. Bridget was unsure which direction the footsteps had gone in, and so was unsure of which direction to head down the hall. She decided to go away from the terrifying cherub, and make her way down the stairs to the kitchen.

Thankfully, the kitchen stairs were unlike her bedroom door, and when she stepped on them they did not creak. She cautiously peered around the corner into the room as she rounded the last corner, but saw that the kitchen was in the exact state it had been left in after the staff had finished the dinner clean up. There were, however, noises coming from the dining room.

Bridget's pulse began to quicken, and she could feel the hand that held the candle beginning to shake. She put the candle in the other hand in the hopes that it would steady her, but it did not. She was so frightened by what might be in the dining room and that she was

here, in the dark, all alone, in her nightdress. She thought about running back up the stairs and alerting her father (somehow, although it would take a great deal of noise and bother to wake him up) to the noise. She thought about ignoring the whole situation and taking to her bed to pretend that she knew nothing of what was happening. But then Bridget was suddenly struck by a thought: what would Scarlett George do?

Bridget thought back to the heroine of the pirate romance novel that she had heard that afternoon. If she were in this situation, she wouldn't do any of the cowardly things that Bridget had considered doing. Instead she would take her candle, walk straight into the dining room, and confront whoever or whatever was in there. And so, inspired by her fanciful novels once again, Bridget summoned her courage and walked across the kitchen.

She paused just before the doorway to the dining room, her fear getting the better of her momentarily. She assured herself that there was probably a perfectly logical explanation for the noises she was hearing, and the moment she looked into the dining room, she would be greatly relieved and could return to bed. And so, Bridget took in a deep breath, held it, and took a step forwards.

Unfortunately, Bridget was not at all relieved at what she saw. A dark figure was shoving items from their dining room into a bag in the corner of the room. The intruder didn't hear Bridget until she let out a small gasp, at which point they whirled around and stared at her. Bridget could do nothing but stand there, frozen in the darkness with her candle in front of her. She could not believe what her eyes were telling her.

The figure was most certainly a man, but beyond that Bridget couldn't tell much about him. He was dressed all in black, and wore a black mask that obscured the majority of his face. The only thing that Bridget could tell about the intruder was that he had the most brilliant turquoise eyes that Bridget had ever seen. She couldn't truly admire

them, however, because she was so frightened. However, instead of expressing fear or shock at being discovered, the figure simply laughed.

His mouth broke into a wide grin and with one arm, he hitched the bag he was holding onto one of his shoulders and he put his other hand on his waist. The shadowy figure was now posing exactly like many of the daring heroes in Bridget's stories. The figure's resemblance to the men in Bridget's stories was so uncanny that she convinced herself she had to be dreaming. As soon as the figure left her alone, she thought, she would pinch herself and wake up.

"I wasn't expecting to meet anyone tonight, let alone... you," the figure said in a sultry voice. In spite of the curious situation that she was currently in, Bridget found herself mildly attracted to the man who was standing before her. She knew it was utterly preposterous, but she couldn't help it. "But for now, I must take my leave of you. Rest well, madam." The figure gave Bridget an elaborate bow and pushed himself easily through an open window in the dining room. Bridget waited a few moments to ensure that he was truly gone. When he was, Bridget nearly collapsed.

She placed a hand to her chest and put the candle down on the table. She hadn't realised how shallow her breathing had become when she had been in the presence of the stranger, but her lungs were suddenly very grateful for the air she was taking in.

Her heart was positively racing, and her hands shook with a force she had never felt before. At the same time, however, Bridget noted another sensation in her body. At first, she couldn't believe it, and then she refused to believe it. Finally, however, Bridget could no longer ignore it, and allowed it to overwhelm her. Bridget was feeling utterly thrilled by the encounter she had just had.

In her mind, she had just experienced what she knew many writers referred to as the 'inciting incident' in many of the novels that she loved. A handsome burglar had broken into her house and she, standing in nothing more than her nightgown with her long, blonde hair cascading down her back, had confronted him.

He'd been confident and daring, and when he noticed her he'd said something that denoted he wasn't afraid of partaking in a risk-taking scenario like this one. She couldn't see much of him, but she didn't need to: she knew that under all that black attire was a strapping, handsome young man. And his eyes... his eyes! What a wonder they had been to behold.

Bridget knew that she could not continue on down this line of thinking; it would do her no good. She shook her head to break the spell the man had cast over her, for she remembered that this was real life, not a story. Or was it? She suddenly remembered that she had believed all of this to be nothing more than a dream, and so she took her arm and gave it a good hard pinch.

Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

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